

Daniel – Introduction

People are fascinated with the future. Whether it's reading about Nostradamus' prophecies or using Tarot cards, whether it is consulting a fortune teller, or having some medium read omens for you, it amounts to seeking to know the future in advance. Sometimes it doesn't take occult forms. Sometimes people consult futurists like Alvin Toffler, or take very seriously the predictions of men like L. Ron Hubbard. Whatever it is, it amounts to people wanting to know what is around the corner. When life seems uncertain, interest in the future escalates. When things seem to be changing at such a rapid pace that we can barely keep up, people want to gain some certainty, stability, by knowing the future in advance.

The fact is, you cannot know the future unless you know who controls the present. And that's what the book of Daniel reveals. Daniel is like a meteorite that has struck our planet – an extra-terrestrial visitor that has invaded our time and space to tell us our own history and future. The book of Daniel has accurately predicted more of the future than any other source of future prediction in human history. But Daniel does not exist to satisfy curiosity. Daniel is written to reveal the God who is behind history – the God who controls history, and the God who is good and protective of His own.

To tackle a book like Daniel means tackling a lot of things at once: a book filled with prophecy, a book rich in historical and geographical background, a book filled with the account of a very godly man. To do justice to a book like this, we really need to back up and become familiar with issues surrounding the book of Daniel. Today I want us to look at some introductory issues regarding this book – the priority of Daniel. The places & the period – where and when did this happen, what was going on? We want to meet the prophet himself – who was this Daniel? We want to briefly sketch his prophecies, so we know what to look for. And then we want to know the purpose for this book of Daniel – why was it written, what lessons must we expect to learn throughout this book.

I. The Priority of Daniel

It's hard to underestimate the importance of the book of Daniel. Some have even called it the most important book in the Old Testament. Daniel is tremendously important for our whole system of thinking about the Bible. First, Daniel is one of the clearest prophecies to the Lord Jesus Christ's identity as Messiah in all of Scripture. Many other books in the Bible mention Messiah, describing His title, His offices, His work, or even His birthplace. But Daniel alone is the book which sticks its neck out, puts its head on the prophetic chopping-block and gives you dates. Daniel's prophecy of Messiah in chapter 9 gives you a starting date, an exact amount of time in between and the end-point at which Messiah will appear and be cut off for His people. Looking back, we can see that no other person appeared in history at the time Daniel prophesied Messiah would come, except Jesus Christ.

Second, Daniel stands as a testament to the supernatural origin of the Bible. Daniel is filled with two things: miracles in the life of Daniel, and prophecies from the lips of Daniel. Miracles and prophecies are two things which speak of the existence of God. Miracles say, God is in control of the laws of nature. If He wants to, He can keep men alive in a fiery furnace, or keep the mouths of lions shut, or cause a finger to write on the wall. Prophecies speak of God's complete control over world history. God can tell you in advance what is going to happen, because He is the sovereign ruler of all history. If one event was random and completely out of God's control, the whole thing could go in another direction, like a pebble which starts an avalanche. But the fact that God can, through the lips of Daniel, predict the kingdom that will follow Babylon, and the kingdom after that, and how it will be split up, and how one of its wicked rulers will affect Israel, and how an even

stronger kingdom will come after that, and when Messiah will come, even stretching beyond Messiah to a future time - all this shows us that God is in control of history. He can perform the supernatural act of foretelling the future because He has already known it and seen it. That's why unbelieving critics of Daniel despise it. Daniel is all about supernatural miracles and supernatural prophecies. But the critics don't want the supernatural, they want a Bible that is as humanly explicable as Shakespeare or the Encyclopaedia Britannica. And so they tear into Daniel as they do with no other book in the Bible. In the last two centuries, critics have tried to prove that Daniel is filled with historical inaccuracies. They claimed that Babylon was a fictional place, until the ruins of Babylon were discovered. They claimed that Belshazzar was a non-existent ruler, until a tablet was found with his name. They have claimed that Daniel was written some time after the time of Jesus, in an attempt to make it look like He wasn't prophesied. Then the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered, some of which were written a good 250 to 160 years before Christ, and the Dead Sea Scrolls contain Daniel. They still claim that Daniel was written in about 167 B.C, long after the prophecies which Daniel refers to.

Of course, there's a reason for this attack. It's not merely coincidental. The book of Daniel speaks of the power and existence of God, of the authority and inspiration and supernatural character of the Bible so clearly, that Satan must take aim at it and try to discredit it, diminish it, and otherwise cause people to turn away from it. Isaac Newton said, "To reject Daniel is to reject the Christian religion."

A third reason for the importance of the book of Daniel lies in the fact that it is a key to unlocking so much of the rest of Scripture. Daniel helps us to understand other books of Scripture. You cannot read the book of Revelation and understand it if you don't understand Daniel, because John is clearly using many of Daniel's images. The book of Revelation is rather like a sequel to the book of Daniel, Jesus refers to things from the book of Daniel in his description of end-time events in Matthew 24 and 25. Paul refers to things from Daniel in 2 Thessalonians 2. The advantage we have with Daniel is that a lot of Daniel's prophecies have already been fulfilled historically. We have the advantage then of looking at how a prophecy corresponded to a fulfilment, and we can use the same technique to understand a prophecy that refers to something yet future.

What you do with Daniel is going to have very important effects on your whole system of theology. It may well determine if you believe in a kingdom to be established on the earth, or whether you believe that the kingdom is already here, or whether you believe the kingdom is spiritual. It will determine how you view the future of the Jewish people. It ends up affecting things like what promises and blessings we believe apply to the church, how the Old Testament Law affects a New Testament believer

The last fifty years or so has seen an abuse of biblical prophecies. One abuse of biblical prophecy is to sensationalise it. In order to sell books or movies, we take the prophecies from Scripture and compare them with world events and sensationalise things. We cause alarm, and panic about the mark of the beast, or the one-world economic system, or the antichrist. And then we make poor quality movies and fictional novels about these things. This has the result of cheapening and trivialising biblical prophecy. It becomes a gimmick, a form of entertainment that takes away from the seriousness and grandeur of biblical prophecy. A second abuse of biblical prophecy is to turn it into a kind of occult fascination. Some people study biblical prophecy for the same reason others go to a fortune teller, or read horoscopes, or use Tarot cards. They want secret knowledge about the future. They want to peer into future events for sheer curiosity's sake. This is an abuse of prophecy, and also cheapens it, demeans it.

But the fact that we have seen a lot of that in the last fifty years or so does not mean that we need to pendulum to the other extreme, where we fear or even belittle biblical prophecy. Prophecy is in God's Word for a reason, and we don't serve the cause of Christ better by avoiding it, or acting like mature believers, never tackle it. Good and healthy ways of responding to biblical prophecy exist, and we need to embrace them.

So you hold an incredibly important book in your hand. It gives explicit prophecies of the Messiah. It reveals the supernatural origin of the Bible, authenticating it. It unlocks all kinds of other puzzles in Scripture.

Understanding how important this book is, let's try to understand the places and the time period in which the book takes place.

II. The Places & The Period

Daniel 1:1-3 *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 articles of the house of God, which he carried into the land of Shinar to the house of his god; and he brought the articles into the treasure house of his god. ³ Then the king instructed Ashpenaz, the master of his eunuchs, to bring some of the children of Israel and some of the king's descendants and some of the nobles,*

There in verse 1, we are given the names of two places that are central to this book: Jerusalem and Babylon. The action takes place mostly in the city of Babylon. If you think of Bible history in 500 year jumps we have Abraham close to 2000 B.C. A little less than 500 years later we are at Moses and Joshua. More or less 500 years later, we are at David and Solomon. And not quite 500 years later we are here at these events, which go from around 605 B.C. To around 520 B.C.

Under David and Solomon, there was one kingdom. But under Rehoboam, Solomon's son, the kingdom split in two. In the north, you had the ten tribes of Israel, and in the south, you had the two tribes of Judah and Benjamin. The tribes in the north basically did a free-fall into idolatry and apostasy. God sent them prophet after prophet, calling on them to repent, but they never did. Israel never experienced one good king. In 722 B.C. God sent the Assyrians to basically come in, take the Israelites captive to their land. The ten northern tribes went to Assyria, some that remained intermarried with pagans and became Samaritans, and basically they were wiped out. God judged them.

The kingdom in the south did a little better. Out of 19 kings, they had 8 that were good. There were times when Judah was turning towards God and repenting. Several revivals took place in Judah. But overall, Judah also steadily descended into idolatry and the sin that goes with it. God sent them prophet after prophet warning them to turn away from their idols, or he would send another nation to come in and destroy them, and take many of them captive for seventy years. Most of them simply couldn't believe it. They couldn't believe that God would judge His own people, using a pagan nation. And Judah became steadily worse and worse – more corruption, more injustice, more trust in their own strength, more ungodly alliances with pagan nations.

Eventually, God's grace runs its course, and God used another nation to judge Israel. The name of that nation was Babylon. Babylon couldn't really be more different than Jerusalem. Where did all false religion begin? Where will false religion consummate? Babylon. Where is God's throne? Jerusalem? One is the seat of idolatry, the other is the seat of true worship. One is where God's temple sits, the other is a city of over 40 temples to false gods. And it was unbelievable to the Jews

when they heard Isaiah and Jeremiah saying that God would use Babylon to judge Israel. But He did just that. Babylon is to the west of Israel, in the area of modern-day Iraq. Babylon came to power when one of the generals in the Assyrian empire, Nabopolassar, pulled a coup, and basically conquered the Assyrians. Nabopolassar sent his son down to Egypt to deal with some Egyptian attacks. And what was the name of his son? Nebuchadnezzar. He tells his son to go down to Egypt, clean up, and on the way back, deal with Judah as well. In 605, Nebuchadnezzar comes to Jerusalem, defeats them, and takes captives. The Babylonians select the cream of the crop of Judah's nobles and take them back to Babylon to be 'Babylonianized', to make them into loyal Babylonians who can go back to their countries and rule on behalf of Babylon.

Amongst the captives who are taken to Babylon are Daniel, and his three friends, Mishael, Azariah, and Hananiah. More captives will be taken in 597 B.C. And the final destruction of Jerusalem occurs in 586 B.C.

So that's the setting. Judah is no longer in her land. What's left of her is now dwelling humiliated in the most idolatrous of nations – Babylon. It looks like Israel is finished. But into this hopeless situation enters God's man for the hour – Daniel. Daniel is God's prophet for this time, showing God still loves His people and still has a plan for them.

That's the time and the place in which the action of this book occurs. Let's take a closer look at the prophet and his prophecies.

III. The Prophet and His Prophecies

Who was this Daniel? Daniel was born in around 625 B.C., and it's very likely that he was somehow related to the king of Judah. That's one of the reasons he would have been chosen as one of the captives to be taken into Babylon. Daniel grew up initially under the godly king, Josiah, one of the bravest and most courageous kings Judah ever had. Watching king Josiah probably radically affected his life, and set his course. Even when Josiah was followed by the evil king Jehoahaz, and then by Jehoichim. Daniel had seen enough godliness in his early life to prevent him from being swayed by the evil he saw. Daniel's remarkable godliness was noticed by several people. It was very quickly noticed by the pagans he served under.

Daniel 4:8-9 *But at last Daniel came before me (his name is Belteshazzar, according to the name of my god; in him is the Spirit of the Holy God), and I told the dream before him, saying: ⁹ "Belteshazzar, chief of the magicians, because I know that the Spirit of the Holy God is in you, and no secret troubles you, explain to me the visions of my dream that I have seen, and its interpretation.*

Daniel 5:11 ¹¹ *"There is a man in your kingdom in whom is the Spirit of the Holy God. And in the days of your father, light and understanding and wisdom, like the wisdom of the gods, were found in him; and King Nebuchadnezzar your father -- your father the king -- made him chief of the magicians, astrologers, Chaldeans, and soothsayers.*

Daniel 6:20 ²⁰ *And when he came to the den, he cried out with a lamenting voice to Daniel. The king spoke, saying to Daniel, "Daniel, servant of the living God, has your God, whom you serve continually, been able to deliver you from the lions?"*

It wasn't only Babylonians and Persians who noticed Daniel's godliness and love for God. Another prophet who wrote at the same time as Daniel, included Daniel alongside some pretty impressive names.

Ezekiel 14:14 ¹⁴ *"Even if these three men, Noah, Daniel, and Job, were in it, they would deliver only themselves by their righteousness," says the Lord GOD.*

To be ranked up with Job and Noah, and that by someone living at the same time as you do, is extraordinary, especially considering that Daniel could not have been very old at the time of Ezekiel's prophecy. And if that wasn't enough, the angel Gabriel reports what heaven thinks of Daniel

Daniel 9:22-23 *And he informed me, and talked with me, and said, "O Daniel, I have now come forth to give you skill to understand. ²³ "At the beginning of your supplications the command went out, and I have come to tell you, for you are greatly beloved; therefore consider the matter, and understand the vision:*

Three times in this book, an angel tells Daniel he is greatly loved, or highly esteemed in heaven's eyes.

Studying the life of a man like this can only richly reward a believer. Chapters 1-6 are really all about the prophet. Each chapter takes a different incident out of his life. In chapter one, Daniel is probably around fifteen years old. In chapter 6, Daniel has survived several kings, the change from one empire to another, and is now getting close to 90. Mark that- when he's thrown into the lion's den, he's almost ninety years old.

To study Daniel's life is to see what happens when you have a rock-solid faith in both the sovereignty and the love of God. It's to see what it is to be godly from childhood to very old age.

Chapters 7 through 12 are not so much about the prophet as they are about the prophecies. These chapters record several visions that Daniel received. These prophecies are so detailed, so remarkable in their accuracy, that critics have simply refused to accept that they could have been written before the time. Daniel predicted the fall of Babylon and the rise of Persia. He predicted the fall of Persia and the rise of Alexander the Great. He predicted that Alexander's kingdom would be divided by his generals. He predicted the coming of the Roman empire.

Daniel's visions come in three forms. He predicts events that will happen during or within several hundred years of his lifetime: the empires that will rise and fall after Babylon. Second he predicts the times of the Messiah: when Messiah will come, what he will do, and what will happen to Jerusalem. Third, he predicts the end times. He predicts times and things that have not yet happened.

When Daniel prophesies, he sees the real mountain peaks of history. There are often large periods of time between those mountain peaks. He doesn't describe all the events that occur in the valley; he is interested in the main mountain peaks.

Sometimes, something fascinating happens in Daniel. While he is talking about one mountain peak, it becomes clear that he is also talking about another one further in the future. It's as if the mountain peaks are lined up in a row and as if he is speaking about only one. Then it becomes clear that what he is referring to goes way beyond that one mountain, and that there must be a large valley of time between one fulfillment and another. No prophet in history, not Nostradamus, not Jean Dixon, not Muhammed, can hold a candle to Daniel's prophecies. Daniel was a prophet of the Most High God.

To study the prophecies is to be amazed that there is only one God who holds all of history in His hand. History is His story, and it is to know this God in a close relationship.

That's the period and place, the prophet and his prophecies. But as we prepare to study this book over the next few months, we need to keep in mind its purpose.

V. The Purpose

Why is this book included amongst the books of the Bible? Why did God inspire these writings and preserve them and get them to us? What are the key ideas of the book of Daniel which God wants us to know and learn.

Lesson One: God is a great God in charge of history and God is a good God who protects His faithful people. In every chapter of this book, you are going to see it is God who sets up kings and takes them down; it is God who decides which world empire follows another, and alongside that, it is God who protects and preserves and keeps His people in the middle of pagan governments. God protects His people through nourishing their bodies, and protecting them against persecution, and delivering them through fiery furnaces and lion's dens. God protects His people through successive empires. God promises to protect and preserve Israel through generations. It's a book of great comfort to Israel – God has not forsaken His people; He still has a plan for them.

Lesson Two: With such a God, we ought to live lives of dedication and faithfulness. If you know that your God is in charge of everything, and loves you and seeks to keep and protect you, then the result is a life filled with hope. You have a powerful trust that God is on your side, working life out for you. That leads to a life without compromise – a life wholly and completely dedicated to knowing and loving God. The better your view of the greatness and goodness of God, the more it will change your life.

2 Peter 3:14 *Therefore, beloved, looking forward to these things, be diligent to be found by Him in peace, without spot and blameless;*

1 John 3:3 ³ *And everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself, just as He is pure.*

The study of Daniel is not an exercise in sensationalism or curiosity. It is not straining out end-time gnats while swallowing gospel camels. Daniel is one of the most important books in the Bible that shouts at the top of its voice: God is real. He is alive, He is in charge of history, and if you know Him through the Messiah, He will care for you. That was the secret of Daniel's life, and it can become the secret of yours too. Let's learn from the life of Daniel and from the prophecies of Daniel, so we can together better know the God of Daniel.