

CHAPTER 19: Daniel

The book of Daniel begins shortly after Babylon's initial attack on Jerusalem. King Nebuchadnezzar plunders the temple. He deports many of Jerusalem's most elite citizens to Babylon. Among those taken are four teenagers from the royal family of David. Our story focuses on these young faithful followers of God – Daniel and his three friends, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. We know them best by their Babylonian names, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. The book of Daniel tells the story of their struggles to follow God in a strange and pagan land.

Daniel and his three friends are wise and capable young men. They are selected from the Israelite nobility to serve in the royal palace of Babylon. They are trained in the Babylonian language and literature. They are served the best food in the land from the royal kitchen. But according to the Israelite's dietary laws (Leviticus 11), much of this food is considered to be unclean. So they refuse to eat this food choosing instead to remain faithful to God's food laws. God honors this. He causes the official in charge of them to look upon them favorably. **Now as for these four young men, God endowed them with knowledge and skill in all sorts of literature and wisdom – and Daniel had insight into all kinds of visions and dreams.** (Daniel 1:17)

So Daniel and his friends end up serving in the royal palace.

Now Daniel lived on until the first year of Cyrus the king. (Daniel 1:21) This indicates that Daniel will spend the remainder of his long life in captivity in Babylon. He will live well into his 80s. He will serve as an administrator in two different empires – the Babylonian Empire and the Medo-Persian Empire. He will serve several different kings from Nebuchadnezzar at the beginning of the book all the way to King Cyrus who is mentioned in the latter part of the book.

About a year into Daniel's career, King Nebuchadnezzar has a very troubling dream. He calls in various court professionals who, in the king's mind, should be able to interpret dreams – the magicians, sorcerers, astrologers and the wise men of the land. He tells them to interpret the dream for him, but he does not tell them what he dreamed. When they are unable to reveal to the king his dream and interpret it, the king becomes angry. He orders that all these so-called court professionals be killed. Since Daniel and his friends are considered as part of this group, their lives are in imminent danger.

When Daniel learns what happened (he was apparently not there) and hears of the king's order, he requests and is granted more time. He and his three friends pray to God

concerning this matter. That night in a vision **the mystery was revealed to Daniel.** (Daniel 2:19) Daniel praises God for revealing deep and hidden things and for bestowing wisdom and power on him.

The next day Daniel goes to the king. He reveals the king's dream and then gives him the interpretation.

In his dream the king saw a great statue made of iron, bronze, clay, silver and gold. It represented successive world kingdoms. A large stone then struck the statue, shattering it. Daniel tells the king... **“You [King Nebuchadnezzar] saw that a stone was cut from a mountain, but not by human hands; it smashed the iron, bronze, clay, silver and gold into pieces. The great God has made known to the king what will occur in the future. The dream is certain and its interpretation is reliable.”** (Daniel 2:45)

Daniel asserts that God is more powerful than any of these future kingdoms. God plans to destroy all of them and then to establish His own eternal kingdom.

With that the king bows and pays homage to Daniel and his God. **The king replied to Daniel, “Certainly your God is a God of gods and Lord of kings and revealer of mysteries, for you were able to reveal this mystery!”** (Daniel 2:47)

The king promotes Daniel to a very high position of authority in Babylon. At Daniel's request his three friends are given key administrative positions. **Daniel himself served in the king's court.** (Daniel 2:49) Everything seems to be going well for Daniel and his three friends up to this point. But that is all about to change.

While idolatry was a major issue for God's people while they were living in Judah, it proves to be an even greater problem for them in Babylon. The next story illustrates this. Nebuchadnezzar builds a 90-foot tall idol of gold. He assembles all of his kingdom's authorities together. Daniel is not mentioned so he is likely on an official assignment somewhere else. The king's officials all gather around Nebuchadnezzar's golden statue. The king orders everyone to bow down and worship it.

But Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego refuse. Threatened with being executed in a furnace of blazing fire, they continue their refusal to bow down to the idol. They tell the king... **“If our God whom we are serving exists, He is able to rescue us from the furnace of blazing fire, and He will rescue us, O king, from your power as well. But if not, let it be known to you, O king, that we don't serve your gods, and we will not pay homage to the golden statue that you have erected.”** (Daniel 3:17-18) Wow! You talk about taking a stand!

Nebuchadnezzar orders his men to securely bind and throw the three Israelite men into the raging inferno. When the king looks into the fire, he cannot believe what he sees. There are not three but FOUR men. And they are walking around in the fire! What is going on here?

[King Nebuchadnezzar] said to his ministers, “Wasn’t it three men that we tied up and threw into the fire?” They replied to the king, “For sure, O king.” He answered, “But I see four men, untied and walking around in the midst of the fire! No harm has come to them! And the appearance of the fourth is like that of a god!” (Daniel 3:24-25)

The king orders the three men released from the fire. **Nebuchadnezzar exclaimed, “Praised be the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, who has sent forth His angel and has rescued His servants who trusted in Him, ignoring the edict of the king and giving up their bodies rather than serve or pay homage to any other god other than their God!” (Daniel 3:28)**

Notice the irony here. God’s servants refuse to worship a pagan king’s god and that same pagan king ends up praising their God! The king acknowledges that the God of Israel is the one true and living God. But there is a more important point to be made here. The covenant God of Israel has the power to deliver His people whenever and wherever He chooses to do so – even against the powerful king of Babylon in his own backyard!

This underscores the fact that God could have intervened and defended Jerusalem against King Nebuchadnezzar’s attack. But He chose not to do so. A greater divine purpose was at play here. God allowed Jerusalem and Judah to be conquered because the people violated their covenant with Him. It was God’s judgment on them for their disobedience. God allowed the Babylonians to prevail. This is the message that had been previously delivered by Jeremiah and Ezekiel.

King Nebuchadnezzar has a second dream. This dream is about a great tree that is cut down with only its taproot remaining in the ground. It is surrounded by grass and animals in the field. Daniel is summoned to interpret the king’s strange dream.

This dream concerns the king himself. Daniel tells him that God is going to make him lose his mind and he will be driven away from society. He will eat grass like oxen in the field. However, he will eventually regain his sanity and his kingdom will be restored to him. Daniel says... **“Therefore, O king, may my advice be pleasing to you. Break away from your sins by doing what is right and from your iniquities by showing mercy to the poor. Perhaps your prosperity will be prolonged.” (Daniel 4:27)**

A year later King Nebuchadnezzar is walking around on the roof of his royal palace in Babylon. He looks around at his magnificent city and says, "Is this not the great Babylon that I have built with my own strength and for my own honor?" Nebuchadnezzar is so full of himself.

Immediately God judges him for his pride. He falls madly insane. He winds up living out in the fields eating grass. His hair grows out long and his nails become like a bird's claws. This is what Daniel had predicted would happen a year before. The once mighty King Nebuchadnezzar is a sight to behold!

Eventually God returns the king's sanity to him. **But at the end of the appointed time I, Nebuchadnezzar, looked up toward heaven, and my sanity returned to me. I extolled the Most High, and I praised and glorified the One who lives forever. For His authority is an everlasting authority, and His kingdom extends from one generation to the next.** (Daniel 4:34) This is Nebuchadnezzar speaking! With his kingdom restored back to him, King Nebuchadnezzar exalts God. This is the last we hear from him in the book of Daniel.

Going from Daniel 4 to Daniel 5 we fast-forward 25 years. Nebuchadnezzar has a son named Belshazzar who has become the king of Babylon. King Belshazzar throws a huge banquet. He uses the sacred gold cups taken from the temple in Jerusalem years before. Suddenly he sees a mysterious hand and it writes something strange on the wall.

Daniel again is summoned to interpret the meaning of the words. He says that the words written indicate that Belshazzar's kingdom is about to be given over to the Medes and the Persians. In other words, "King, your days are numbered."

And sure enough, that very same night Babylon falls to the Medo-Persian Empire. In the darkness Darius the Mede and his forces infiltrate and capture the city. During this attack King Belshazzar is killed.

Earlier we saw where Daniel's three friends refused to bow down and worship a false god. As a result they were threatened with death. In this next story it is Daniel's turn to face persecution for his faith.

The story takes place shortly after the Medo-Persian Empire begins to rule. Daniel has been retained by the new government as one of its chief administrators. Some of Daniel's new colleagues grow jealous of Daniel's success and so they plot against him. Aware of Daniel's habit of praying to God three times a day, they come up with this plan. They go to King Darius and convince him to issue a royal edict. Here it is: for the next 30 days no one in the kingdom is allowed to pray to any other god or man except the

king. Doing so will be punishable by being thrown into a den of lions. For whatever reason, the king goes along with their suggestion and issues the edict.

Daniel is not at all phased by this. He continues praying as he has been doing for years. His detractors see and hear him praying to God. They accuse him before the king of violating the royal edict. The king, being quite fond of Daniel, regrets having made the edict. But under Medo-Persian law a king's edict cannot be reversed even by the king himself. So there is nothing King Darius can do about it.

So the king gave the order, and Daniel was brought and thrown into a den of lions. The king consoled Daniel by saying, "Your God whom you continually serve will rescue you!" (Daniel 6:16)

We are told that all that night the king is troubled and cannot sleep. But there is no record about Daniel's night with the lions. We can only imagine what it must have been like for him. Daniel sits in darkness. There is the stench of animal feces and dead carcasses. He hears strange noises. He senses the presence of these large wild beasts all around him. I will venture to say that Daniel probably did not sleep well that night either!

Well, at first light the king rushes to the lion's den. **As [the king] approached the den, he called out to Daniel in a worried voice, "Daniel, servant of the living God, was your God whom you continually serve able to rescue you from the lions?" Then Daniel spoke to the king, "O king, live forever! My God sent His angel and closed the lion's mouths so that they have not harmed me, because I was found to be innocent before Him. Nor have I done any harm to you, O king."** (Daniel 6:20-22)

Daniel is brought up out of the lion's den unharmed. Those who had accused Daniel are themselves thrown into the den. They are mauled to death instantly by the hungry lions.

Just as the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar had done previously, the Medo-Persian King Darius extols the greatness of the God of Israel: **I [King Darius] have issued an edict that throughout all the dominion of my kingdom people are to revere and fear the God of Daniel. "For He is the living God; He endures forever. His kingdom will not be destroyed; His authority is forever. He rescues and delivers... He has rescued Daniel from the power of the lions!"** (Daniel 6:26-27)

And so it is that God continues to prosper Daniel.

The last part of the book of Daniel contains a series of Daniel's visions. The first is a vision of four beasts. One is like a lion; one like a bear; one like a winged leopard. Each of these symbolizes a powerful godless empire. The fourth beast is a super beast of sorts, with iron teeth and ten horns. One particular horn among these ten, **another horn, a little one** (Daniel 7:8) represents an arrogant king who rises up and exalts himself above God. He even persecutes God's people.

God Himself then shows up in this vision. Daniel describes Him with the term "the Ancient of Days." As in Ezekiel's vision God is sitting on a throne of fire with blazing wheels. Daniel also sees **one like the son of man [coming] with the clouds of the sky.** (Daniel 7:13) In this vision God, the Ancient of Days defeats the aforementioned arrogant king.

In another of Daniel's visions he sees a two-horned ram and a one-horned shaggy goat. An angel of God by the name of Gabriel identifies these symbols for Daniel. The ram represents the kings of the Medo-Persian Empire. The goat represents the king of Greece. In the vision the one horn is broken off and replaced by four new horns. It is widely held that this is a prediction of the rise of Alexander the Great, still future for Daniel. History tells us that Alexander's vast worldwide empire was split into four separate kingdoms after his death.

One of these four kingdoms will be ruled by a particularly vile king. In this vision he is described as a **little horn which grew exceedingly great.** (Daniel 8:9) He will attack Jerusalem, exalt himself above God and defile the temple with idols. In the end God destroys this evil king. The description of this particular individual is similar to that of the arrogant king from the previous vision. Many scholars believe these visions foresee Antiochus Epiphanes who years later committed the very acts that Daniel is describing here.

These visions puzzle Daniel. He cannot help but wonder when all of these events will take place. Daniel consults the scroll of the prophet Jeremiah and reads where Israel's exile will last 70 years (Jeremiah 25:11 and 29:10). By this time Daniel is very old. He does the math and he realizes that, based on WHEN Jeremiah's prophecy was written, the 70 years of exile is almost up! Daniel asks God to fulfill His promise soon.

Daniel falls under deep conviction. He knows from Leviticus 26 that even during this period of God's judgment, while God's people are in exile, if they will confess their sin God will bless them again. So Daniel prays. He confesses his own sins and then the sins of the nation.

"Listen attentively, my God, and hear! Open Your eyes and look on Your desolate ruins and the city called by Your name. For it is not because of our own righteous deeds that we are praying to You, but because Your compassion is

abundant. O Lord, hear! O Lord, forgive! O Lord, pay attention and act! Don't delay, for Your own sake, O my God! For Your city and Your people are called by Your name." (Daniel 9:18-19)

The angel Gabriel appears again to Daniel. He gives Daniel a rather complicated explanation of Jeremiah's 70 years prophecy. He refers to it as "a period of seventy weeks." Bible scholars are widely divided on what it all of it means.

Daniel has one final vision. This one is of a coming war. The vision is so vivid and deeply disturbing to Daniel that he literally shakes with fear. He becomes physically ill and mourns for several weeks.

It is then that Daniel sees **a man clothed in linen.** (Daniel 10:5) This is a divine messenger who has been sent to minister to Daniel. He has come in response to Daniel's prayer. **Then he said to me, "Don't be afraid, Daniel... I have come in response to your words."** (Daniel 10:12)

The messenger explains the reason for his delay. He had heard Daniel's prayer and had planned to come to him earlier but had encountered opposition. **"However, the prince of the king of Persia was opposing me for 21 days. But Michael, one of the leading princes, came to help me... Now I have come to help you understand what will happen to your people in the latter days, for the vision pertains to future days."** (Daniel 10:13-14) Here we see that there are apparently spiritual powers that are hostile to God and His messengers – spiritual warfare taking place that we cannot see with human eyes.

The messenger explains to Daniel about the upcoming war he saw in the vision. There will be a sequence of kingdoms – Persia then Greece, followed by lesser kings. All of these lead up to a final mysterious "king of the north" who invades Jerusalem, sets up idols in the temple and exalts himself above God. But then, this king comes to ruin. We heard this scenario played out before in two previous visions with the rise and fall of an arrogant king. Like I said before, some scholars say this is a reference to Antiochus Epiphanes, but we do not know for sure.

The fact is that there is no agreement among Bible scholars about the exact meaning of these visions in the book of Daniel and here is why: Some see these visions as having a "near" fulfillment, happening closer to Daniel's day. Others see them as having a "far" fulfillment, in other words, being fulfilled well into the future, maybe even future for us today. What we know from history is that there have been a number of oppressive empires, kings and dictators through the centuries who have risen to power and attacked and killed God's people. So these visions could point to any number of them. Or they may be describing events still to come. Again, we really don't know.

Whatever the case, the book of Daniel has been designed to offer hope to all future generations of God's people. One day God will confront evil rulers. He will rescue His world and His people. He will establish His kingdom over all the nations. This has been a recurring theme throughout our story so far.

With his mission to Daniel now completed, the messenger of God, the man clothed in linen, prepares to leave. Two angels join him and Daniel listens in on their conversation. One of the angels asks the messenger, "When will the end of these wondrous events occur?" That is a good question! The messenger answers with a rather cryptic response, one that Daniel does not understand. So Daniel asks the messenger for clarification.

He said, "Go, Daniel. For these matters are closed and sealed until the time of the end." (Daniel 12:9) In other words, it is not for Daniel to know. And so both Daniel and we the readers have been left with many questions unanswered.

But there are many things that we do know. We know that the future for the people of Israel is bright. We know that the 70 year period of Israel's exile is winding down. We know they will soon be heading home. And that is very exciting!

But not Daniel. He will die an old man in Babylon. He will not live to see all these wondrous events fulfilled. So, the very last lines in the book of Daniel are directed at him.

The messenger leaves Daniel with these words... **"But you should go your way until the end. You will rest and then at the end of the days you will arise to receive what you have been allotted."** (Daniel 12:13). In other words, "Daniel, one day you will die. But then you will be resurrected back to life where you will receive your reward from God."

And herein lays the REAL hope for the future. Not just of a restored Jerusalem and temple in the Promised Land. That is all fine and well and certainly something to look forward to. But the greater hope is that of a future resurrection when God's people will enjoy an eternal kingdom and dwell with Him.

Now that is something to look forward to!