

INTRODUCTION TO DANIEL - Beth Worley

What comes to mind when you think of Daniel? Young men in a fiery furnace? A finger writing on the wall? Do you think of a young man in the lions' den? Did you know Daniel was about 80 years old when he was thrown in with the lions?

Many of us know and love these stories from the book of Daniel. These events that we are often most familiar with come in the first half of the book. It's filled with challenging and encouraging accounts of faithful, brave people and a miracle-working God.

Many of us are not as familiar with the second half of Daniel, with its visions and prophecies and strange beasts. We tend to do one of two things: we either become absorbed in the prophecies, trying to work out every last detail. Or we find it all too strange, and avoid it.

The book of Daniel is made up of these two parts—the stories we may have learnt in Sunday School, and the prophecies we often avoid. But Daniel is *one book*, all given to us by the Lord. It was *all* inspired by God to help us to know him better, and to understand his big salvation plan. Even if we learnt these stories as children, there is so much more we can learn as we study them through more mature eyes.

The book of Daniel is all about kingdoms: Nebuchadnezzar's kingdom, Belshazzar's kingdom, Cyrus's kingdom, kingdoms that were in the future for Daniel (like Greece and Rome), but most of all it's about *God's* kingdom.

It's about proud people who the Lord humbles. It's about faithful people and an even more faithful LORD.

This book answers some of life's big questions.

- Where is God when life falls apart?
- Who is really in charge of world events?
- Where can we find hope when things appear hopeless?

The book of Daniel is as relevant today as it ever was.

As we start to look at this book, it helps to know a bit about what God was doing with his people Judah at that time. These events happened about 600 years before Jesus was born. At that time, Israel (the northern kingdom) had effectively ceased to exist. Judah (the southern kingdom) remained, but the people of Judah weren't faithful. They worshipped idols and refused to turn back to God. They had broken their covenant with the LORD. God had been merciful for centuries, and withheld punishment—but punishment *was* coming. He was about to send them into exile in Babylon.

Daniel lived at this turning point in Judah's history. He was caught up in these national events. He was among the first group to go into exile. In fact, there would be two more waves of exiles. Within 20 years, Jerusalem would fall, and the nation as a whole would be in exile where they would stay for about 70 years.

Daniel was young and smart — and ripped from his home and all he knew. It must have been devastating for him.

But the exile was also shocking for all the people of Judah. God had promised their forefathers the land of Canaan—which became known as Israel. But now the process of exile had begun: they were being ripped from that land.

It's a great comfort and joy to us that God keeps his word. But as we look at this time in Judah's history, it's also sobering to realise that God keeps *all* of his word—the warnings as well as the promises.

The exile raised some big questions for the people of Judah:

- God had promised them the land of Israel. Was God still faithful to his covenant promises if they were being taken from that land?
- People in surrounding nations at that time believed that 'gods' controlled certain areas or countries. Perhaps some people wondered: *could* the LORD help his people in a foreign land like Babylon?
- The people of Judah were being punished for their sin; would the LORD even *want* to help them when they were being punished?
- Would they ever return to the land God had promised to Abraham?

When Daniel and his friends, for the LORD's sake, refused the rich, royal food and ate only vegetables —and grew fatter—they found out that God *was* looking after them, even in this foreign place. Even though the nation of Judah was being punished for its sin, the LORD *still* wanted to help them.

Even in captivity, even when their world had fallen apart, even as they had to serve a pagan king in a foreign land, the LORD was with them. God's power was not limited to the land of Israel. The LORD can work in *any* nation.

Doesn't this encourage us to see God's faithfulness and sovereignty! God had a plan for Daniel and his young friends. He did not abandon them; he will not abandon us. He helped them in their hardest time; he will help us. The LORD was in control then; he is in control still.

Often we read parts of the Bible and focus on what the *people* were doing. But the Bible is also about God revealing *himself* to us—and he certainly does that in Daniel. We're not just meant to learn about Daniel and his friends; we're also meant to come to know the LORD better. Things like this:

- The LORD is the one who handed his people over to a foreign nation to punish them—because he takes sin very seriously. But even when they sinned, he didn't abandon them.
- He's often called the 'God of heaven' in this book because he is Lord of all.
- God is not only powerful in all countries, he is also powerful throughout all time. He knows the future. Because he knows the future, he was able to reveal mysteries to his

servant Daniel: what dreams meant, what mysterious writing on the wall meant, visions of the future.

In the first half of the book, we see God revealing the immediate future to Daniel—and those events happened *just as the Lord said*. Therefore, when we come to the second half of the book — prophecies about the more distant future — we already have evidence that we can trust that God will do what he says. *God's actions* in the first half of the book mean we can trust *his prophecies* in the second half.

It is certainly true that the second half of Daniel (chapters 7-12) is harder to understand than the first half. That's because it is apocalyptic writing, with visions, weird beasts and strange numbers. This special form of writing reveals future events, often through dreams and visions. It focusses on the coming of God's kingdom, and often refers to the end times. It uses strange, vivid pictures to help us understand spiritual realities. It was usually written when God's people were suffering and needed encouragement to persevere. And so this type of writing often features God fighting *for* his people *against* their persecutors.

Perhaps it might help to think of looking at a painting. If you stand up very close, you see lots of brush strokes; sometimes it's a bit blurry; it might not make much sense. But if you stand back, it's much easier to see the big picture, the overall picture, and make out what the artist was painting.

Apocalyptic writing is a bit like that. We may not understand all the small details. We don't need to worry about every little detail, because sometimes those details can be confusing. But if we step back and look at the overall 'picture', the big picture, we can focus on the main message God wants us to understand, which is clear: a message of hope ... victory ... justice ... rescue. Kingdoms will rise and fall, rise and fall. Evil rulers will come and go. But *God's kingdom will come*.

So there are two 'traps' to avoid:

- Let's not be discouraged by the strangeness of this apocalyptic writing, and avoid these chapters.
- On the other hand, let's not strive to pin down *every* last detail. For example, don't get too caught up in the numbers. In apocalyptic writing, numbers are usually symbolic; and Bible scholars with years of study don't always agree about them. The point is that God limits the rule of oppressive leaders; and he has appointed a time when his kingdom will come in all its fullness.

As one human kingdom fails, another replaces it. While human kingdoms last, God's people can expect persecution. Jesus said that Daniel spoke of him — the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven into the Father's presence. In Jesus, the Messiah, *our future is secure*. One day, God *will* strip all human kingdoms of their power. The Son of Man *will* come in glory. And God's people *will* receive his kingdom.

The people of Daniel's day were called to long-term obedience. So are we. People would oppose and persecute them. They may do the same to us. God wanted to prepare his people for suffering, and sustain them in it. He will do the same for us. And he has decreed a time when all those who oppose God and his people will meet their end.

Daniel's vision spoke of one who would "finish transgression, ...put an end to sin, ... atone for wickedness, ... bring in everlasting righteousness" (Daniel 9:24). Some of these things Jesus did on the cross; others he will do when he comes again. And we long for that time when God ends sin and its effects forever.

God had saved Daniel and his friends in the lions' den and in the furnace. Through Daniel's visions, God was warning his people that he would not always rescue them in this life. They needed to persevere until the end. But when it looks like they are crushed, God will put an end to all suffering. Even this is under God's control.

There are three great hopes and promises in the book of Daniel.

- The first was to Daniel's people. Even though they were in exile, God had said through the prophet Jeremiah that their exile would last 70 years. Then God would save and restore the faithful remnant of his people. Daniel lived to see the beginning of this return to the promised land.
- Second, God's salvation plan, which he put in place before the creation of the world, would continue. God would restore the faithful remnant of Judah, and through Judah, the Son of Man would come: Jesus, the Messiah.
- Third is the promise of resurrection. God's faithful people — today, those who trust in Jesus — will rise to everlasting life. Daniel was told that he would finally die. But he was assured that he would rise to receive the inheritance God had planned for him.

God's salvation and his promises of resurrection and of his coming kingdom are secure because they are based in God's sovereignty. The LORD who rules over kings and nations, over fire and lions, over history and the future, also rules *over death*.

How can the book of Daniel encourage us?

- First, we do not need to have our future circumstances revealed to us. God himself holds our future. God, who did what seemed 'impossible' for Daniel, is still in charge of everything. True wisdom is humbly trusting him with our lives.
- Second, may we show the same humble dependence on God and faithfulness that Daniel's friends did when they said: the God we serve is *able* to deliver us, but even if he does not, we will not worship anyone or anything else.
- Third, it's easy to look at our world and be fearful. But God will hold the rulers of the nations accountable. They hold power only because the LORD chooses to allow it. One day they will also acknowledge God as sovereign. In fact, one day *everyone* will bow before Jesus and recognise him as Lord.
- Fourth, the LORD truly has the right and power to rule everyone and everything.

May the Lord greatly bless you as you take a fresh look at this part of his inspired word: the book of Daniel.