

Daniel: Prevailing in a strange time...

Why read Daniel now?

Daniel captures the history of the people of God in exile, far away from 'normal life' according to their vision and calling. Though we find ourselves grounded not far away but within our own households as the nation responds to Coronavirus, there is a deep sense for us all of being exiled from what is usual, what is normal, and what we are familiar with.

The book of Daniel paints a powerful picture of how to thrive in the strangest (extremely hostile) of surroundings, how to spiritually prevail and be used by God to transform what the bible describes as the most ungodly of environments.

During our current 'exile', let us wait on God and be intentional in allowing Him to prepare us for what is ahead. As we emerge 'blinking into the daylight' of life resuming post-Coronavirus exile, I believe God wants to use us to be transformers of the communities around us, and to play our part in the revival and transformation of the nation. In the harshest of settings, Daniel and his contemporaries prevail and overcome – and as we observe the peeling back of what can feel at times like a dominating and oppressive secularising 21st century culture, how is God calling us to grow and learn to each become authoritative overcomers in the power of the Spirit and to the glory of King Jesus?

Setting and occasion

There is some discussion about when Daniel was written exactly: some biblical scholars argue for the 2nd century BC (165BC), and some argue for the 6th century BC (535BC). Some of the historical events prophesied about later in Daniel imply it could be written to a 2nd century BC audience, a time in which the Jews came under severe persecution from the then King Antiochus IV. Particularly the desecration of the Jewish temple, and utter contempt of the God of the Jews as we find in chapter 11 aligns with the religious oppression that did take place between 167 and 164 BC, and sparked the Maccabean revolts.

That being said, some of the knowledge of Babylonian and Persian culture strongly points to it being written 300 years earlier in the late 6th century. My own view is that it was written then, but neither view undermines its scriptural authority. Both Jews and Christians down the ages have read Daniel and included it within the canon of scripture, and continued to find God speaking afresh through it.

Daniel in biblical history

It is always helpful to try to relate one piece of the bible to another. Both Jeremiah and Isaiah provide some backdrop to the setting of Daniel. In Jeremiah chapter 27 we are introduced to how the Israelite people of God were taken captive and displaced to Babylon: Jeremiah 27:1 – 7:

'Early in the reign of Zedekiah, son of Josiah, King of Judah this word came to Jeremiah from the Lord... (v5) With my great power and outstretched arm I made the earth and its people and the animals that are on it, and I give it to anyone I please. Now I will hand all your countries over to my servant Nebuchadnezzar King of Babylon... All nations will serve him and his son and his grandson until the time for his land comes; then many nations and great kings will subjugate him.

Jeremiah was called by God to prophetically summon the people of God back to God. However, due to their resistance, the judgement of God falls upon them, and they are taken forcibly into captivity and exiled in Babylon. Daniel chapter 1 relates how this happened:

(Daniel 1:1 – 2) ‘... Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it. And the Lord delivered Jehoiakim King of Judah into His hand, along with some of the articles from the temple of God. These He carried off to the temple of his god in Babylonia...’

There are two things here: The first is to notice how the bible relates both in Jeremiah and Daniel how God is ‘in charge’ of this: How the Lord *delivered* the people of God into the hands of the Babylonian King. Even though the Jews are now under the earthly control of someone else, Nebuchadnezzar is only acting within the permission and will of God. This introduces a major theme running throughout Daniel of the sovereignty of God – or the overall control and power God has to act as He chooses because He is God.

The second thing to recognise is how devastating this is for the Hebrew people who had been brought out of Egypt into their own land, who are now exiled into a foreign country. What is more is that the most valued symbol of their national and religious identity – the temple – had been pillaged (Daniel 1:2) and precious worship artefacts now being placed in the temples dedicated to Babylonian gods. Psalm 137, written in the time of exile in Babylon, violently reveals the pain of the Israelite people:

(Ps 137:8 – 9) ‘O daughter of Babylon, doomed to destruction, happy is he who repays you for what you have done to us – he who seizes your infants and dashes them against the rocks.’

Yet God does not curse the Babylonians, as Jeremiah prophesied God is using the nation of Babylon as agents of His judgement. His command to the Jews was:

(Jeremiah 27:12) ‘Bow your neck under the yoke of the King of Babylon; serve him and his people and you will live.

(29:7 – 14) ‘Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper... When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfil my gracious promise to bring you back to this place... I will be found by you, and will bring you back from captivity...’

So, God allows his people to be exiled, and calls them to seek the furtherance of their captors – as we’ve just read, to ‘seek the peace and prosperity of the city’. Here we can introduce another theme which will run through Daniel of the right relationship of believers to the surrounding culture within which we find ourselves - and we find some fascinating and very challenging insight within this book.

Interpreting Daniel

Before outlining the structure of the book, a note on how one can go about interpreting Daniel: Daniel is classed by biblical scholars as what is called ‘apocalyptic’ material, which basically means writings relating to the end of the world. Another obvious book in the bible like this is Revelation at the end of the New Testament. There are two things to be aware of with reading apocalyptic scripture: The first is that often many Christians have been drawn into trying to track down when this means Jesus will return at the end of human history, or trying to confirm or disprove prophecies which have either come true or not.

Certainly, there are some parts of the end of Daniel that could match up with history: In the period just before Jesus came, the Jews were under severe religious persecution, and some of the visions in the final chapters of Daniel could align with real history from that period. However, they are not exactly correct. When

faced with this, some can be tempted to dismiss this biblical material as being inaccurate – which is to wholly miss the point of apocalyptic writings.

Biblical interpretation

The bible contains different types of writings which need to be read in different ways. For example, I could write a love poem to my wife (maybe I should?!) using different language than I would if I was leaving her a note about a job I had done to the house. The same is true of scripture: For example, the psalm we used just above, Psalm 137 - the violent language used is the pictorial language of anguished, heartbroken prayer – ie the request for the brutal murder of infants did not historically take place in response to Psalm 137 – thank God! But it does reflect the honest heart cry in prayer to God that was prayed by a grieving Jewish nation in exile. Do you see the point? Different parts of the bible are to be used in different ways, which does not undermine their truth as authoritative scripture, it just means that they have different functions, rather than simply interpreting everything at face value. Which no one does anyway when you think about it! I haven't seen too many believers gouging out their eye like Jesus told them to in Matthew 5:29!!

So, what are we to do with apocalyptic scripture? Well the imagery used is very impressionistic, or even artistic and fantastical, but not necessarily scientifically precise. It intends to convey *general* concepts rather than conveying *particular* details. When you enter into some of the visions Daniel sees in the second half of the book and read the images as specific markers on a timetable of human history, we are beginning to misunderstand their original intention. This is a bit like the gift of prophecy, or listening to God: Often poetic or pictorial language is used to describe *general* emphases of what God intends to do. However, they remain vitally important in their overall objective when we remember that the primary purpose for any part of the bible is to reveal God and who He is. The visions bring out some key descriptors to understanding what the Kingdom of Heaven is and how it operates, what kind of conclusion the world is heading to, who and what the redeeming 'Son of Man' will be and do, and how we play our part in the collision of spiritual forces operating in the world.

Daniel: The narrative

What are we going to find as we read through Daniel? What you'll find as we read through the book of Daniel is that it feels as if it is broadly divided into two sections: the first 6 chapters all relate different stories of Jewish captives in exile in a strange and oppressive land. All six stories tell of life within an environment that is hostile and often dangerous for God's faithful people. Daniel is the hero, and plays a leading role in all of the stories except one in chapter 3, when three friends with whom Daniel is closely related take centre stage. Each one of these stories include a test. One could read them from Daniel's perspective and come away with an unnatural character portrait of him having exceptional faith and endurance. But to read them for what they teach us about God means these stories become about God's wisdom and faithfulness – which is vindicated every time!

The second section from chapters 7 – 12 record four prophetic visions Daniel receives whilst serving in the courts of the Babylonian King. Overall, these visions emphasise what has come out of the stories: that God is sovereignly in overall authority over the world, often despite circumstances which would seem to prove otherwise. Those who are wise in God, like Daniel, can expect deliverance from God, often in the present, and if not then - definitely in the future. Faithful living is always rewarded.

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So, what can we pray God imparts to us as we read Daniel?

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- 1) Throughout Daniel we read about what living for God looks like within a 'world' / culture which is alien to the ways of God. As a church, as we begin to look out towards the communities we serve, towards British society that we play our part within, my sense is that God is calling us to become people who not only love our communities and nation (which in recent times can feel increasingly hostile and alien to Christianity), but who live in such a way that God uses us to transform it, in a similar vein to the way Daniel and the others were used. God is preparing us to be ready for the transformation of our region!

To summarise, what God wants to do is to transform us from people who just about *survive*, to people who thrive in, and influence our culture.

- 2) Within this 'alien' culture, again and again the mightiness of the Lord is displayed! If 'God' is on trial, over and over He vindicates Himself!!! His Kingdom is advancing forcefully, and is an enduring Kingdom...
- 3) Daniel is also a very prophetic book, and we glean lots of insight into how the new covenant will be, and the new thing that God will do through Jesus. In terms of *how* we will speak about and read Daniel together, we will approach it in this way:

We get to talk about what God is doing through Jesus from the angle of Daniel. We might start with Daniel as the core text, but I invite us to be thinking 'how does this relate to what Jesus teaches, and what we find in the NT?' (Which whilst we're on, is a really healthy way to use the Old Testament!

In order to thrive in a culture foreign to Christianity; in order to enjoy God's life to the full; in order to live for God faithfully amidst trials and difficulties – we need a big vision of God. We need a huge revelation that He is the one who makes all things new, who sustains all things through His powerful word, and who is breathing life into each one of us to shine like stars for Him as we hold out the word of truth. I sense God wants to enlarge our vision of Him and His nature and wonderful ways - in order that we might trust Him more, and live by faith more readily.

But this is not just good preaching that will do this, nor careful bible study – to have our vision enlarged is a spiritual thing that I would like to invite us all to seek God for Him to work in us and amongst us. Someone once said that 'the whole bible is about God – but the whole of God is not in the bible', which picks up what Jesus meant when He taught us that the Holy Spirit is our counsellor and guide into all truth. As we read and study Daniel, please enjoy the scripture, enjoy learning more of who God is – but as we do that, let's open our spirits to the Holy Spirit to work powerfully in us and to reveal Jesus more perfectly in our hearts!

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