

Staying Strong in a Hostile World

Daniel 1-6



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Introduction to the book of Daniel

Background

Israel's King Solomon died in 931 B.C. This was followed by a period of in-fighting which resulted in the nation splitting into 2 parts – Israel (the 10 northern tribes) and Judah (the 2 southern tribes). This division was never healed. Both sides turned their backs on God's ways, and were ultimately judged for their persistent rejection of God. Israel survived until 722 B.C. and was then destroyed by the Assyrians. Judah was spared until the time of the Babylonian empire.

God's judgment of Judah for her wilful rebellion against Him took the form of a 70 year exile from their homeland (605 – 536 B.C.), a period called the Babylonian captivity. The book of Daniel is a historical account of this period in Judah's past.

We will be looking at chapters 1-6 in this series of bible studies.

Chapter	Events	Date
Ch 1	Daniel in Babylon (Daniel, a teenager)	605 B.C.
Ch 2	Daniel interprets Nebuchadnezzar's dream	603 B.C.
Ch 3	Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah in the furnace. (Aged in late 30's or early 40's)	approx. 580 B.C.
Ch 4	Nebuchadnezzar's humbling, conversion and restoration	approx. 580-562
Ch 5	Belshazzar's judgment - the writing on the wall	539 B.C.
Ch 6	Daniel and the lion's den (Daniel, an old man)	539 B.C.

These chapters are mainly a narrative history; a record of events that took place during the exile. They cover a period of nearly 70 years,

during the reigns of Nebuchadnezzar (605-562 BC), his son Nabonidus (556-539 BC), and his grandson Belshazzar, who was co-regent with his father Nabonides from 552—539 BC.

Though outside the scope of this series, chapters 7-12 describe a number of prophetic visions of the future that Daniel received during the time of the exile. The visions in chapter 7 and 8 occurred during the reign of Belshazzar. In chapter 9, Daniel prays that for God’s own glory He will bring the exile to an end. The prophetic vision that follows is an answer to his prayer. Chapters 10-12 record a single prophetic vision of cosmic spiritual warfare between good and evil; where because God’s power is greater, the saints will endure and inherit God’s everlasting kingdom.

The main character in the book of Daniel is **God**. In every circumstance, in every crisis, this book points us to a God who is at work in human history. **Daniel**, meanwhile, is primarily God’s prophet and a model believer who shows what it means to live distinctly in a hostile world.

The over-arching message of Daniel has been expressed in this way:

**“ God rules,
is building an everlasting kingdom,
and calls people to live in the light of that fact.”**

[Fyall & Sydserff]

Sources

Teaching Daniel, Bob Fyall & Robin Sydserff, Christian Focus Publications Ltd. 2016

Daniel: Far from home, Justin Mote, 10publishing. 2012

The Message of Daniel, Ronald Wallace, The Bible Speaks Today, IVP, 1979

Be Resolute , Warren W Wiersbe, David C Cook, 2000

1. The Lord reigns in a strange land

Daniel chapter 1

For starters : Think back to when you first left home and were on your own. What new adjustments did you have to make? What was the most difficult part of the process?

Introduction

The events described in this chapter take place at the beginning of the exile (605 B.C.) and cover a period of 3 years. Daniel and his friends would have been teenagers, torn away from their home country and taken 800 miles away to Babylon. They were enrolled in an intensive training programme designed to transform them into loyal Babylonian bureaucrats.

Read Daniel chapter 1

1. At the start of this chapter (verses 1-2), where does power **appear** to lie, and how is this power demonstrated?
2. What specific tactics does Nebuchadnezzar use to give Daniel and his 3 friends a new Babylonian outlook? (vs 3-7)

Note: “the language and literature of the Babylonians” (v4)

Babylon was a culture of many truths (relativism), many ways to live (moral relativism) and many gods (polytheism). The name ‘Babylon’ literally means ‘gate of the gods’. Enter the world of Babylon and you enter the world of many gods.

[Fyall & Sydserff, p94]

3. Daniel made the decision to be open about his faith, making his allegiance clear (v8). What do you make of the fact that he said “no” to the royal food and wine, but said “yes” to a number of other things?

4. Having made the decision not to take the king’s food and wine, the way Daniel went about this is striking. What can we learn from his manner and approach?

5. Trace Daniel’s emotions through this chapter. What might he have felt -
 - In verse 3
 - In verse 8
 - In verse 15
 - In verse 20

6. In what ways does God honour the trust and obedience of Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah?

7. Look at the whole chapter. List all the ways you see how God is in control and is at work below the surface of human affairs.

Apply these truths (Choose one or more of the following questions to discuss, and then to act upon):-

8. What does living for God look like in daily life ?
 - How do we determine what we will say “yes” to, and what we will say “no” to?
 - How do we decide where, and when, to draw the line? (i.e. how do we co-operate without compromise?)

9. Part of what it means to show our commitment to God is simply being open about the fact that we are Christians.
 - How open are you about your faith as you go about your daily activities - with work colleagues, neighbours, classmates, etc?
 - What stops you speaking about Jesus?

10. As Christians, we, like Daniel, live as “exiles in Babylon”, that is, in a society that does not recognise God’s rule. In this context, God wants us to live distinctively, showing our allegiance to Him.
 - What is your motivation for doing this? What stops you doing this?
 - The pressure to conform is timeless. In what forms does this pressure take in our culture today?
 - In what small ways are we tempted to compromise our lifestyle or beliefs?

11. What aspect of Daniel's character or conduct in this chapter impresses you the most? How can you cultivate this same quality in your own life?

In conclusion

The message in this chapter is that God is the one in complete control of His world. This is seen in the deliverance of the people of Judah into the hands of the king of Babylon, and also in the vindication of the stand that Daniel, (Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah) took for Him.

Despite his youthfulness, Daniel was able to resist compromise because of his relationship to the sovereign God. His obedience was simply the outworking of God's kingship in his life. He became a blessing to the society into which he had been transplanted. (Jeremiah 29:4-7)

Note – v21

In verse 21 the writer comments that Daniel remains in Babylon until the first year of King Cyrus. In that year (538 B.C), the exiles were allowed to return to Jerusalem (Ezra 1:1.) It means that Daniel will live through 70 years of exile, and outlast the Babylonian and Median empires.

Nothing will be able to destroy the individual who looks to God and his promises and obeys his law.

2. The Lord reveals that He reigns

Daniel chapter 2

For starters: Describe a dream that you have had. Why do you still remember it?

Introduction

The events in this chapter follow immediately after those in chapter 1. King Nebuchadnezzar has a troubling dream that he cannot get out of his mind. In Babylonian thinking, a dream was a message from a god – and the king was so anxious to find out what his dream meant that he was prepared to execute a whole government department if he didn't get an explanation! It is an exciting and dramatic story.

Read Daniel chapter 2: 1-23

1. How would you describe the atmosphere in Nebuchadnezzar's court at the start of this chapter?
2. What do we learn from verses 1-13 about human power and wisdom? (*What do the wise men emphasize twice in verses 10-11?*)
3. What qualities of character, already evident in chapter 1, are seen in the way Daniel reacts to this crisis (vs 14-18)?

4. When God gives His answer to the prayer of Daniel and his friends, Daniel responds with praise. What truths about God and His character does he praise? (vs 19-23)

Three aspects of Daniel's spiritual maturity stand out in this chapter : his *wisdom* in response to a crisis, his *prayer* in response to a problem and his *praise* in response to God's work in his life. (Douglas Connelly)

Read Daniel 2: 24-49. This records Daniel's audience and conversation with the king.

5. What is Daniel at pains to emphasize to Nebuchadnezzar in their conversation?
6. The suspense has been building, and we have had to wait until verse 31 in the chapter to learn what Nebuchadnezzar's dream was.
- Describe the statue that he saw in his dream and what happens to it.
 - What do you find most striking about this dream?

The interpretation of this dream (given through Daniel) is that earthly kingdoms rise and fall, but God will establish an Everlasting Kingdom that will fill the whole earth.

7. How does Nebuchadnezzar respond to Daniel's interpretation of his dream? (vs 46-49)

Applying these truths (Choose one or more of the following questions to discuss, and then to act upon):-

8. What can we learn from Daniel

- in his dealings with Arioch and Nebuchadnezzar
- in his response to a crisis

9. How do you respond when your prayers are answered?

10. Write your own psalm of praise to God, using Daniel's psalm (vs20-23) as a model. Thank Him for aspects of His character that have been seen in His dealings with you, and praise Him for ways He has protected, guided and helped you.

In conclusion

The message of this dream of a four-part statue, rock and mountain is that Daniel's God is the 'Lord of kings' – who will set up a kingdom that is still to come, that will never be destroyed. (*This is the gospel of the kingdom that Jesus will inaugurate*).

This dream would have brought reassurance to the exiles. While their present situation gave the appearance that Nebuchadnezzar was supreme in power in his rule over God's people, the exiles are being assured that the promises of an eternal kingdom made earlier to King David (see 2 Sam 7) will still be fulfilled.

3. The Lord reigns in fiery trials

Daniel chapter 3

For starters : When have you felt the pressure to comply with some practice (whether at work, or in a family/friendship situation) which compromised your faith and convictions?

Introduction

In Chapter 2, Daniel was able to explain King Nebuchadnezzar's dream and speak to him about God's coming kingdom that will never be destroyed (2:44). The king's response at the time, in acknowledging the Lord, seemed encouraging (2:47,48-49).

However, by the time of the events of this chapter (occurring about 20 years later) Nebuchadnezzar, far from worshipping the God of heaven, makes an image that he commands all his subjects to worship. He was aiming to unify his kingdom through religion and fear. (In those days statues would be dedicated as an object of worship to the might of the king and his all-conquering empire.)

Read Daniel chapter 3

1. Imagine that you are a reporter on the plain of Dura, covering the dedication of this statue live on radio. (vs 1-7)
 - How would you be describing the event to your listeners?
 - What emotions would you be feeling ?
2. What might have prompted the astrologers to act in the way they did ? (vs 8-12)

3. What is revealed about King Nebuchadnezzar's character from verses 13-15?

4. What does the reply of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego to the king reveal about their faith and confidence in God? (vs 16-18)

5. What does God do? How do the details in these verses emphasize the miracle that has occurred? (vs 19-27)?

6. King Nebuchadnezzar thought he was the one with power. How does he now understand that it is in fact the God of the Jews who has greater power and control?

Applying these truths (Choose one or more of the following questions to discuss, and then to act upon):-

7. The way that Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego take their stand is striking. What can we learn from their manner and approach?

8. Daniel and his compatriots in Babylon found themselves in conflict with the society they lived in. In chapter 1, there was a fairly low key challenge to their allegiance to God; but in this chapter the situation is quite different. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego faced a direct and hostile challenge to their faith.

Similarly,

- What kinds of subtle pressures to conform to secular agendas do Christians face today?
- What kinds of direct and hostile challenges to faith do Christians face today?
- In such circumstances, what does God expect from us?
- What can we expect from God?

9. As you look back over this chapter, what lessons about the risks and rewards of obedience to God are most significant to you?

10. “The stories of Daniel and his friends (and that in chapter 6) talk about suffering and evil, and a good and great God who thrusts his saints into overwhelming and awful situations. They talk about maintaining faith in the face of severe testing. They talk about the presence and absence of God in a world that is seemingly dominated by forces more powerful and visible than God himself.” (Daniel, Kingdom of dreams, Reid & Morris)

How does this quote help you see this narrative’s relevance to our discipleship today, and not just as a child’s bible story?

Reflect :

What might help you to remember that the Lord is the one who is in total control for His people and His promises, and so be encouraged to stand in obedience to Him?

**“ Fear not, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name, you are mine.
When you pass through the waters I will be with you ...
When you walk through the fire you shall not be burned,
And the flame shall not consume you.”**

(Isaiah 43:1,2)

In conclusion

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were men of faith, not of presumption. They believed that God could deliver them, but they would trust Him even if He didn't. This is how faith is supposed to operate in our lives.

In this instance, God chooses to rescue them and so to demonstrate His complete control over even the greatest earthly king and kingdom of the time. King Nebuchadnezzar himself came to acknowledge the reality of 'the Most High God' (v26).

4. The Lord reigns in salvation -

Nebuchadnezzar's conversion - Daniel Chapter 4

For starters : Describe your most humbling experience. Did a positive change come out of that ordeal?

Introduction : This chapter starts with a letter or document written by King Nebuchadnezzar- the great, proud, powerful king - describing how God humiliated him for 7 years and then graciously restored him.

1. Nebuchadnezzar's contented state (v4) is abruptly shattered by a another dream. Draw pictures to illustrate what Nebuchadnezzar sees in his dream (vs 10-12; 13-16)

A large empty rectangular box with a black border, intended for drawing to illustrate the dream described in the text above.

2. When Daniel interprets the dream for the king, what is his message to Nebuchadnezzar; and in what manner does he deliver it? (vs 19-26)

3. Daniel concludes his explanation of the dream with some advice to the king (v27). What risks did he face in doing this?

4. God's purpose for giving the dream is repeated 3 times (vs 17, 24-26,32) Why do you think God was so intent on impressing Nebuchadnezzar with His absolute authority instead of His grace or love?

5. Why did God wait a full year between the announcement of judgement and its actual fulfilment (v29)?

6. What specific steps did God take to humble Nebuchadnezzar? (vs 31-33)

7. A new Nebuchadnezzar emerged from this experience. How has he changed? (vs 34-37; vs 2-3) (Also compare his proclamation with what he said about God in 3:28 after the fiery furnace incident.)

Applying these truths (Choose one or more of the following questions to discuss, and then to act upon):-

8. How has this chapter helped you to be more confident of the fact that God really **is** in complete control of all people and circumstances?

What practical difference will this make to your outlook as you face the coming week?

9. Read the following commentary and discuss your reactions to it:-

“Chapter 4 ends with Nebuchadnezzar coming to submit to God’s rule. He has, at last, understood the “gospel”, been humbled by God and acknowledges God to be the true king. He has been changed from tyrannical despot to humble believer. That God can do that, using the courageous stand and bold witness of four young men, is inspiring.

We might have thought that it was the exiles that would be conformed to the world they were placed in. In reality, it is the king of Babylon who has been conformed – humbled to worship the Most High God.” [Mote, p18]

How does this encourage you as you seek to stay strong in a hostile world?

10. Have you ever felt that God let you be “cut down” and that only a “stump” was left ?

What did the hard lesson teach you about the character of God, and how he works in our lives to bring us to spiritual maturity and Christlikeness?

11. Why do you think it was so hard for Nebuchadnezzar to humble himself before God? (see also the description of Nebuchadnezzar in chapter 5:18-21.)

Why is it hard for people today to do the same?

In conclusion

This is the third of 3 consecutive chapters tracing Nebuchadnezzar’s journey to faith. He is shown in all his power as king of Babylon, but on each occasion he is confronted by a greater power – the God of heaven who rules and who eventually humbles Nebuchadnezzar to bring him to saving faith. In chapters 2 and 4, God’s revelation comes through interpreted dreams. In chapter 3 Nebuchadnezzar sees first hand the miraculous deliverance of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego from the fiery furnace.

The message repeatedly brought to the king is that God is in control in our world : *“the Most High rules the kingdom of men, and gives it to whom he will.”* (vs 17,25,32) Nebuchadnezzar, like everyone else, needed to understand that we only have anything in this world as a gift from God. The purpose of God in humbling him was so that he would acknowledge that God is sovereign over human kingdoms, and that his own rule was totally under the rule of God. In Nebuchadnezzar’s transformation, we see that God is powerful enough to save anyone.

5. God reigns in salvation –

King Belshazzar's judgment Daniel chapter 5

For starters : Have you heard anyone use the expression “I saw the handwriting on the wall” ? What incident were they referring to?

Introduction

Without any explanation, chapter 5 starts with a new king, Belshazzar, on the throne. The events in this chapter take place in 539 BC when Daniel is more than 80 years old. The successors to Nebuchadnezzar's throne have ignored him and he has been out of the limelight and power structure of Babylonian politics for some time. However, when Belshazzar is faced with a fearful and perplexing problem, the queen mother remembers Daniel and he is called in to help.

Read Daniel 5:1-31

1. Verses 1-4 mention a great banquet hosted by King Belshazzar. Who was present and what would have been the mood of the guests?
2. How does God break in to this party, and what effect does it have on King Belshazzar?

3. Read 5:7-9. This is the third time that the “wise men” of Babylon fail to interpret the message that God is declaring to their king. (see 2:10-13; 4:4-7) What point is being made?
4. How do the queen mother and Belshazzar view Daniel? (vs 10-16)
5. What is the background to Belshazzar’s judgment (vs 18-24)
6. Daniel was respectful to the king but he was not afraid to tell him the truth. What message does Daniel give him?

Note

Daniel chapters 4 & 5 are clearly linked and show 2 ways we can live before God. In chapter 4, Nebuchadnezzar learnt his lesson and submitted to God. In chapter 5, Belshazzar refused to learn from his predecessor’s experience (5:18-21) and was judged.

Applying these truths (Choose one or more of the following questions to discuss, and then to act upon):-

7. How does this chapter demonstrate that 70 years of life under Babylon’s influence had not broken down Daniel’s convictions and commitment to the Lord?
How do you think he was able to stay faithful?

8. What can we learn from Daniel's example that will help us to resist the pressures to compromise and to drift from our Christian convictions?

9. How is the contrast between God's power and human power drawn in this chapter? How does this encourage you?

In conclusion

In verse 29 we read of Belshazzar's response to the pronouncement of God's judgment. He does what he had promised (v16) but he fails to listen to what Daniel has said and repent. In vs 30-31 God's word to Belshazzar is fulfilled. Mighty Babylon falls. Kingdoms will come and go, but the word of the Lord stands firm. The Lord God is truly the one who rules in this world.

6. The Lord reigns in the lion's den

Daniel chapter 6

For starters : : Recall the last time you visited the zoo. Imagine that you somehow get trapped in the lions' enclosure – what would be your reaction? What would you do?

Introduction

Though Daniel was influential during the time of Nebuchadnezzar, he was probably marginalized for over 20 years during King Belshazzar's reign. Having been summoned from obscurity to read the writing on the wall for Belshazzar, Daniel is elevated to "the third highest ruler in the kingdom" (5:29) just before Belshazzar's untimely death at God's hand. This is Daniel's position when Darius the Mede takes over the kingdom in 539 B.C. Daniel has now been in Babylon for nearly 70 years.

Read Daniel chapter 5:30 – 6:15

1. Chapter 6 gives us an insight into Daniel's life. What do we learn about the way he lived and how his faith impacted his life? (vs1-9)

2. What tactics did those who were seeking to undermine Daniel employ? (vs 4-9,11,15)

3. Darius issued a decree that allowed people to pray, but only to him. Daniel had 3 choices in response to the king's decree : (1) stop praying for 30 days (2) pray secretly (3) pray as usual. Explain the consequences of each and why you think Daniel made the choice he did.

Which choice would you have made?

Godliness when faith is under attack comes more easily when godliness has been shown in times of no attack. [Mote p23]

Read Daniel 6:14- 28

4. King Darius is powerless to help Daniel. How do verses 14-22 point to where true power lies?

5. What is Daniel's testimony from the lion's den? (vs 21-22)

6. What specific aspects of God's character can you discover in Darius' decree praising the "God of Daniel" (vs 25-27)

In chapter 3 we saw the pressure on the exiles to do something God forbade (worship an idol). Here, we see the pressure on an exile not to do something God commands (pray to him). These are the twin pressures God's people always face in the world – sins of commission and sins of omission (Mote p22)

Applying these truths (Choose one or more of the following questions to discuss, and then to act upon):-

8. What “lion’s den” do you face in your life? How does this passage challenge you to trust in God rather than in your own plans; and to wait for Him to act?

9. The events in this chapter happened when Daniel was more than 80 years old. Compare Daniel’s actions in this chapter with his actions in chapter 1 when he was a teenager. Discuss what it would have taken for Daniel to live such a consistent life of faithful witness and obedience to God for more than 70 years despite living in the corrupt society of Babylon.

[Note too that what is arguably Daniel’s greatest test comes along late in life. If you are an older Christian, how is this an important message to you to finish well?]

Daniel – a man of prayer.

We have seen that prayer had a central place in Daniel’s life. In chapter 9:1-19 there is the opportunity to listen in on Daniel as he prays – you may find it helpful to look at this passage.

10. How has the study of these chapters in Daniel challenged you, and/or encouraged you as you seek to live faithfully under the rule of Jesus in a world that is often hostile to Him and to his people ?

- List the main lessons that you want to remember
- Turn these observations into prayer

In conclusion

The book of Daniel has a message for us as God's people who live as "exiles" in the world today (1 Peter 1:1) and who may be hated and discriminated against because of our stand for Christ.

It reminds us that we serve a mighty and risen King – God is more powerful than all earthly empires and individuals, and He is at work in the world and is building His everlasting Kingdom.

God wants us to live lives of integrity and to have a steady trust in Him, so that when we feel the pressure to conform to the world around us whether in a direct or a subtle way, we will be able to stand firm in Him, and know that our future is secure.

As we do this, God will use our witness to advance His kingdom in ways that we may or may not see.