

DANIEL: ON THE WAY TO THE FUTURE

by Ray C. Stedman

Almost everyone looks at the book of Daniel with a sense of wonder and anticipation, because this is usually regarded as a prophetic book foretelling the future. This is true. The book of Daniel, together with the book of Revelation, marvelously unfolds future events as God has ordained them in the program of history. By no means has this book yet been fulfilled, neither has the book of Revelation. These two books, one from the Old and one from the New Testament, remarkably complement each other in their symmetry and harmony. The book of Revelation explains the book of Daniel. The book of Daniel lays the basis for the book of Revelation. If you would like to know God's program for the future, it is essential that you understand this book of Daniel.

But knowledge of the future can be a very dangerous thing. Imagine what would happen if any or all of us possessed the ability to know what is going to happen in the days ahead. Think what an advantage that would give us in the stock market, in the buying of insurance, and in other practical matters of life. By and large, God does not unfold the future to us -- certainly not in detail and certainly not any individual's future. But what he does show us in the prophetic scriptures is the general trend of events and where it will all end. Anyone who investigates this area thoughtfully, carefully, and scripturally will discover significant and helpful things about what is happening in our world today. Everything that is happening is working out God's purposes on earth. These will all end exactly as God has foretold. We can understand what is happening today if we know what the prophetic program is. God has taken two precautions in this matter of unveiling the future. First, he has clothed these prophetic passages in symbolic language. He has given them to us in figurative form. That is why in these prophetic books unusual things appear, strange beasts with many different heads and horns sticking out here and there, and images of all kinds, and other indescribable visions. You have the same thing in the Book of Revelation -- bizarre beasts with strange combinations of characteristics.

These have always puzzled people. You can't just sit down with the book of Daniel and the book of Revelation and read them through and understand them as you would a novel. You have to study them, taking the whole of the Bible to interpret the symbols in the books of Daniel and Revelation. This is one of the locks that God has provided to keep curious minds from getting into these books without an adequate background in scripture. You cannot understand what is going on in them without first knowing a great deal of the rest of the Bible. These symbolic things are signs erected by God, and signs are given to us so that we may understand facts that are otherwise hidden. God's program for the future is hidden from us until we spend time understanding the signs, and these books are full of signs.

A second precaution God has taken in Daniel, and even more especially in the book of Revelation, is that he doesn't introduce the prophetic section first, but brings us through six chapters into an understanding of the moral character he requires of the reader before the prophetic program can begin to make sense. In other words, you can't understand the last section of Daniel unless you have lived through and understood what is involved in the first six chapters. There is no way to understand what the prophetic program means unless you first grasp the moral lessons of the first part of the book. There is no way to cheat on this. You can't just read it through, and then turn to the prophetic program and hope to understand. You will find that you get nothing out of it. You really have to carefully analyze these initial chapters, think them through, begin to walk accordingly, and experience them, before the prophetic program comes to life. That is the glory of God's book. You can't understand it with just the intellect.

You can sit down with the prophetic outlines of Daniel and of Revelation, draw charts, spend your time explaining to people what all these things mean and how God's program is going to work out, and analyze it down to a gnat's eyebrow -- but unless you have incorporated these lessons of the first part of the book into your own life, you will discover nothing there to enrich your life.

The Lord Jesus himself points this out during the Olivet Discourse when his disciples asked him to name the sign of his coming and what the symbol of his return to earth would be. Jesus said, "So when you see the

desolating sacrilege spoken of by the prophet Daniel, standing in the holy place then...let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains..." (Matt. 24:15, 16) "Get out of the city of Jerusalem, because things will happen there that will tremendously affect the people living in that area. Then is the time to flee the city, for the great tribulation will be upon you."

When he said, "When you see the desolating sacrilege standing in the holy place," he added in parentheses these words, "let the reader understand." That is, don't read through Daniel superficially. Think it through. Give yourself to thought on this. You have to understand what he is talking about before you will be able to recognize the desolating sacrilege, or abomination of desolation, when it comes. This is why the Lord went on to say that the world in its superficial approach to truth will not understand when it cries, "Peace, peace, peace," for there will be no peace; sudden destruction will come upon them and they will be swept away just as the people of Noah's day were swept away when the flood came.

Now all of this is a warning to take the book of Daniel seriously and to endeavor to understand the structure of this book as we delve into it. This book divides very simply into two sections, as I have already suggested. The first six chapters are a history of the prophet Daniel himself and his friends in the land of Babylon -- men of faith in a hostile world.

Let me tell you that there is no section of scripture more helpful to someone who is trying to live as a Christian in difficult surroundings, than these first six chapters of Daniel. If you are working in a company surrounded by a godless crowd who are taking the name of God in vain every moment, who agree with the ideas and attitudes of the world and its ways, and who make fun of the things of God, showing little interest in what God says to mankind, then I suggest that you read carefully the book of Daniel.

The first six chapters are for you if you are a teenager going to school where you are surrounded constantly by those who seem to have no interest in what God is like, or in the things of God. Daniel and his friends were themselves teenagers when they were first taken captive by Nebuchadnezzar and carried off to the land of Babylon. As they began their career of faith, they did so with a total lack of understanding of life and with all the insecurity of a teenager in a hostile environment. The book records in these first six chapters the pressure they underwent as they stood for their faith in the midst of these difficult surroundings.

In chapter 1 the young men are confronted with the necessity of changing their diet. Ordinarily, there would be nothing particularly significant in that. Many of us could stand that, perhaps frequently. But these young men already have been told by God what they are not to eat, and the very things that they were told not to eat are the things that are required eating for them as prisoners in the palace of the king of Babylon.

What are they to do? This king is the most powerful tyrant who shall ever have lived on earth. The Bible itself records that there was no king that had ever lived before Nebuchadnezzar or would ever live after him who was equal to him in authority. There were no restraints whatsoever upon what he desired to do. His word was absolute law. He could take any man's life at any time. Later on in his reign, he took the lives of the sons of the king of Judah as their father watched and then had the father's eyes put out. Another man was burned to death over a slow fire. This king was an expert in torture. So these young teenagers facing this test know that they have to either comply with the king's demands or forfeit their lives.

What can they do? They feel all the pressure and they hear all the familiar arguments that any person hears today to try to get them to give up acting on the basis of faith. They surely hear the argument, in whatever form it took in those days, "When in Rome, do as the Romans do." "Everybody else is doing this; what difference does it make what you eat? So what if you have a ham sandwich with these Babylonians? What's the difference?" After all, they are prisoners in a country far away from home. Their own country has been laid waste. Who will know, or care, what they do?

They feel that pressure. But these young men stand fast and God honors them. God gives them the grace to stand despite that pressure, and as a result they are exalted and given positions of authority and responsibility in that kingdom. This story of repeated pressure goes right on through this book.

In chapter 2 you see part of the reason for this kind of testing for these particular young men. It comes out

more clearly here, in the story of the great dream vision of King Nebuchadnezzar. He dreams one night of a great image of a man with a strange body. He had a head of gold, shoulders of silver, mid-section of brass, legs of iron, and feet of a clay and iron mixture. But he forgets his dream. He calls in the wise men and asks them to tell him not only the interpretation, but the dream as well. (I've often wondered if this wasn't the beginning of that popular song, "You tell me your dream and I'll tell you mine.") The astrologers and the soothsayers and the sorcerers of Babylon are totally unable to come up with anything. Obviously, if the king can't tell them the dream, then they can't dream up an interpretation. Thus their lives are forfeit.

Daniel is placed in the middle of this situation. Again God's man is pressured and threatened with death if he does not conform.

Again God's man comes through, as he always does when he is willing to stand and obey God despite the pressures. God overrules in the affairs of men. Life is never determined by mere superficial pressures. The outcome that seems logically inevitable as you face a situation is not necessarily the outcome that will happen if you are trusting in the invisible God who rules the affairs of men. And that is the great lesson of this book all the way through. You find it beautifully expressed by Daniel in his prayer to God in chapter 2:

**"Blessed by the name of God for ever and ever,
to whom belongs wisdom and might.
He changes times and seasons;
he removes kings and sets up kings;
he gives wisdom to the wise
and knowledge to those who have understanding;
he reveals deep and mysterious things;
he knows what is in the darkness,
and the light dwells with him." {Dan 2:20-22 RSV}**

If you are in touch with a god like that, you don't need to worry what the crowd is doing. For that same God is able to carry you through and to work the situation out no matter how impossible it looks. That is exactly the story of Daniel, repeated five different times through these first six chapters.

And God gives to Daniel and his friends the privilege of obliging the most powerful man on earth to recognize the overall government of God. Do you know that this is exactly the position every believer is placed in today? The world lives with the idea that there is no God, or that if he does exist he has no real power. He doesn't do anything. He doesn't change history. He doesn't affect human lives. He doesn't enter into situations and make any difference. He is a great old man in the sky, off there somewhere, who doesn't really affect anything that happens down here. That is the world's philosophy.

But every believer is put into a position in which if they walk faithfully, if they obey what God says despite the pressures that are put upon them, they are given the privilege of opening the eyes of men to the fact that God exists, that he is not dead, that he is at work in the affairs of men, and that he is a power to be reckoned with.

In chapter 3 you have the story of the fiery furnace. The young men are commanded to bow down before the image which Nebuchadnezzar erected, proudly thinking of the image in his dream. Because he was told that he represented the head of gold, that he was the great king of earth, in pride he lifted himself up and caused an image to be erected on the plain. It was a huge image, as tall as some of our rockets that we shoot into the sky, and the whole crowd is gathered on the plain, with these three young men among them.

All are ordered to bow down and worship the image. In order to encourage them, a great furnace was built at the other end of the plain, and they are told that if they don't bow down, that is where they will end. Now that is a lot of pressure for young people to bear, and they have some additional inducements as well. There is a band -- and what a band! The instruments are given to us here and we don't even recognize the names of all of them. When the band plays -- the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, bagpipe, and every other kind of instruments -- everybody falls down and worships. All except the three young men.

When they are brought before Nebuchadnezzar, he orders them to fall down. Then they say these wonderful

words, "O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter." (3:16) They are not being impertinent. They mean that they do not need to take any time to think over their answer. "We don't need to take any counsel. We know what to say."

"If it be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace; and he will deliver us out of your hand, O king. But if not..." {Dan 3:17b-3:18a RSV}

Those are words of faith: "But if not." "Our God is able to, but we don't know the mind of God. His thoughts are greater than our thoughts. His ways are different than ours. It may be that he won't do it. But even if he doesn't,"

"... be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods nor worship the golden image which you have set up." {Dan 3:18b RSV}

Now these are young men who have learned that there are things more important than life. It is better to be dead and obedient to God than alive and disobedient to him. It is far more profitable to the individual concerned to walk with God at the cost of life itself than to be disobedient to what God has said. God will never be in any man's debt, therefore he greatly honors these young men. As a result, they come out of the furnace without even the smell of fire upon them. You know the record. What an amazing story that is!

Then in chapter 4 you have the conversion of Nebuchadnezzar. Did you know that this whole chapter is the testimony of the greatest king that ever lived, the greatest tyrant that ever ruled? It is the story of how God broke the pride of his heart, humiliated him, humbled him, allowed him to exercise his pride until it resulted in what always results when men live in pride -- madness. He went out and ate grass in the field for seven years. His throne was preserved, but he acted like an animal. This is what always happens to man when he chooses to walk out of fellowship with the living God. He becomes animal-like, bestial, brutish. King Nebuchadnezzar became like an animal.

Then the king tells how his reason was restored to him by the grace of God, and his closing word in this chapter is a great testimony of his faith, of how God humbled him and brought him back:

Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and extol and honor the King of heaven; for all his works are right and his ways are just; and those who walk in pride he is able to abase. {Dan 4:37 RSV}

Who brought him to this? Humanly speaking, it was Daniel and his friends; four young men were used of God to win the heart of the greatest king of the greatest empire the world has yet seen.

Now look at chapter 5. Here is the story of the handwriting on the wall, the familiar story of King Belshazzar. Note the luxury and licentiousness and the lust of that kingdom -- a degenerating, deteriorating kingdom -- yet in the midst of it Daniel, having lived through three empires, is still prime minister. God uses him to interpret this strange figure of the hand that appears and writes upon the wall: the judgment of God upon that licentious king. This bears out the thesis of this book -- that God is at work in the affairs of men, and any man who sees beyond the things that are seen to the things that are unseen, and acts accordingly, will find that God is with him, supporting him and strengthening him all along the way, bringing him out to the praise of his glory.

Chapter 6 tells of the lions' den and it is the same story told in still another way. Darius throws Daniel into the lions' den, but God sent his angel to shut the lions' mouths. Daniel is brought out again, delivered by the hand of God.

Chapter 7 begins the prophetic section, starting with the vision of the four beasts. It is interesting that these four beasts cover the same period of time as the four divisions of the image that Nebuchadnezzar had seen in chapter 2. That image had a head of gold, symbolizing the Babylonian kingdom; shoulders of silver, for Media-Persia; the trunk of brass symbolizing the Grecian empire, and then the two legs of iron representing the two divisions of the Roman Empire; and terminating at last in a broken kingdom, characterized by feet of mingled iron and clay. This great prophetic passage outlines history from Daniel's day clear past our own day,

to the end of time and the return of Jesus Christ. For as the prophet watches, he sees a stone cut out without a hand strike the image on its feet, utterly demolishing it, and then grow to be a great mountain to fill the earth. Clearly this pictures the kingdom of God and the return of Jesus Christ.

In chapter 7, then, the four beasts represent the same kingdoms, but from God's point of view. They are nothing but beasts growling and fighting and quarreling with each other. I think Dr. Scofield points out that all the symbols of modern nations are representations of birds or of beasts of prey. Our own nation is symbolized by an eagle, a bird of prey. The British Empire is a lion. Russia is a bear. The prophet sees these nations struggling together culminating in the powerful reign of a single individual over the whole of this Western world.

Then in chapter 8 you see the movement of Western history. The ram and the he-goat come together, and this is a picture, as we are told later in chapter 11, of the conquest by Alexander the Great and the rise of the kingdom of the Seleucids in Syria as opposed to the Ptolemies in Egypt. These two families occupied the center of history for centuries after that -- the struggle between Syria and Egypt, with little Israel caught in the middle. The battle rages back and forth, and today Israel is the most fought -- over country in all of history. More battles have occurred in the land of Israel than in any other spot on the face of the earth, and it is in that very same area where the last great battle -- the battle of Armageddon -- is yet to be fought.

In the midst of this, in chapter 9, is Daniel's wonderful prayer as he pours his heart out to God. The answer to his prayer, in the last section of the chapter, is one of the most remarkable prophecies in all the Bible: the prophecy of the seventy weeks. This is the timetable of prophecy concerning the nation Israel. It gives us the principle that is called "the great parenthesis" -- God has interrupted his program for Israel and has inserted between the first coming and the second coming of the Lord Jesus the present age in which we live.

This indeterminate period, which has now spanned more than nineteen hundred years, comes between the sixty-ninth week of years and the seventieth of the prophecy. The seventieth week, a week of seven years, is yet to be fulfilled for Israel. As you read of this you will see that this is what the book of Revelation and other prophetic passages call "the great tribulation," the time of Jacob's trouble. It lies ahead. It has been broken off from the other sixty-nine and is yet to be fulfilled.

Then chapter 10 presents the things unseen which are behind the things that are seen. This is another great revelation of God's sovereign government in the affairs of men and is the explanation for the events of history. What causes the things that happen today? Well, there are unseen forces at work, and these forces are here clearly revealed to Daniel.

Chapter 11 is one of the most remarkable chapters in the Bible in that it records prophecy that, for the most part, has been fulfilled in detail. It foretells the struggle between the king of Syria and the king of Egypt which took place after Daniel's day. It is prophetically and historically fulfilled. These historic events are described in great detail and cover two or three hundred years of history. You can see that the prophecies here have been worked out exactly in the pattern of history. Among other outstanding individuals, Cleopatra appears in this chapter, prophetically foretold.

When you come to the thirty-sixth verse of the eleventh chapter, a noteworthy break occurs. It is introduced by the previous verse, in which the angel says to Daniel:

"... and some of those who are wise shall fall, to refine and to cleanse them and to make them white, until the time of the end, for it is yet for the time appointed." {Dan 11:35 RSV}

Here begins a passage that deals with that seventieth week of Daniel that is yet to be fulfilled -- the time of the end, the last days, the ultimate arrangement of earth's kingdoms just before the return of Jesus Christ. This remarkable passage predicts an invasion of Palestine and a counter -- invasion from Egypt in the south, and then the meeting of two great armies in the land of Israel and the ultimate destruction of those armies there on the mountains of Israel. This is also clearly described in the thirty-eighth and thirty-ninth chapters of Ezekiel and the second chapter of Joel. And you will find other prophetic references to this.

The beginning of chapter 12 introduces the greatest event of history yet to be fulfilled: the coming again of Jesus Christ. It is not mentioned as such here, but this is what Daniel hears:

"At that time shall arise Michael, the great prince who has charge of your people [Israel]. And there shall be a time of trouble, such as never has been since there was a nation till that time; but at that time your people shall be delivered, every one whose name shall be found written in the book." {Dan 12:1 RSV}

This is followed by a resurrection:

"And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt." {Dan 12:2 RSV}

And the final judgment of God:

"And those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the firmament; and those who turn many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever." {Dan 12:3 RSV}

Then Daniel is given a sign of when this will occur:

"But you, Daniel, shut up the words, and seal the book, until the time of the end. Many shall run to and fro, and knowledge shall increase." {Dan 12:4 RSV}

Many Bible scholars understand this to be an indication that as we near that time, transportation and knowledge will rapidly increase just as they have in our own time.

One last thing about this final chapter is important. Daniel asks certain questions of the angel who has revealed this to him, and then he is given to understand two great principles that are at work in human life. You and I often hear people discussing what is happening in the world, with newspaper commentators and others constantly pouring into our ears reports of terrible things. People often say, "What is happening? Is the world getting worse and worse or is it getting better and better?"

On one hand you will hear people describe things in such a way that you are bound to say, "Well, the world is getting worse and worse." Then someone replies, "No it isn't. Look at this, and this, and this. I believe the world is getting better. We are progressing." Now the book of Daniel makes it very clear that we never will understand God's word and God's work until we believe both of those principles. For in the tenth verse of chapter 12 Daniel is told:

"Many shall purify themselves, and make themselves white, and be refined [good will get better]; but the wicked shall do wickedly; and none of the wicked shall understand [but evil will get worse]; but those who are wise shall understand." {Dan 12:10 RSV}

Jesus said that the good seed has been sown, but the enemy has come and sown tares among the wheat. "Let both grow together," he says, "until the harvest." (Matt. 13:30) I think this is certainly true in history. Today evil is worse than it has ever been. It is more subtle, more devilish, more satanic, more difficult to detect than it ever has been before in human history. But good is better than it has ever been before. Good is more powerful. Its effect in human society in relationship to the evil around it is far greater than it ever has been before.

These two principles are at work in human society, but neither shall overpower the other. Good is not going to become so triumphant that evil finally disappears, as once was thought at the turn of the century. Nor is evil going to be so powerful that good finally disappears. Both are going to come into a headlong conflict, and the Bible everywhere records that at that precise moment in history God shall again intervene in human affairs. Of the ultimate clash of these two great principles working in human society, Daniel is told:

"Blessed is he who waits and comes to the thousand three hundred and thirty-five days.

But go your way until the end; and you shall rest, and shall stand in your allotted place at the end of the days." {Dan 12:12-13 RSV}

Here are prophetic words by Helmut Thielicke, the professor director of Hamburg University in Germany,

We men may do what we will. Nebuchadnezzar may come (and Genghis Khan and Mao Tse-tung) yet none of them can break God's plans, but rather must fulfill them -- even against their will. Even though what we hear now is in mournful, minor tones, what is being played is still God's symphony and it will be played out to the end. The individual tones may think that they know what is what. They may want to assert themselves and swing out on their own, yet they have all been composed into a score in which God alone is in command and in which everything, when it is heard from heaven's vantage point, has its place in God's succession of tones that end in his final chord. The rich of this world are in the process of going but the kingdom of God is in the process of coming. Don't ever think that anybody will ever be able to break away from serving him, though he renounce God ten times over. Even in the extreme perversion of authority, as in the tyranny of a totalitarian state, men are compelled despite themselves to preserve a remnant of God's order. They can never consistently succeed in devilizing and ruining his world. God says, "I who have the power of the whole world of space, should I not be able to encompass your little life, hear your questions and your groans and unravel the tangled skein of your threats?"

Prayer:

Our Father, thank you for this reminder from the book of Daniel that you are a living God at work in the affairs of men; that we need not fear even though terrors reign on earth and men hide themselves for fear of them. You are in control of all, and he who walks with you will overcome. He who obeys you -- not only in the great and glorious moments of victory, but also in the quiet hour when no one sees -- is faithful to you, and shall at last triumphantly overcome as Daniel did and stand in his place in the last days. We thank you for this promise. Help us to walk in the strength of it. In Christ's name, Amen .

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