

FAITHFULNESS IN A FAITHLESS AGE: DANIEL'S WITNESS TO THE KINGDOM OF GOD

by
Jacob Z. Elwart¹

Introduction

The chaos of living in a faithless age is seen in war, disease, theft, murder, adultery, hunger, riots, denial of rights to people who deserve them, and the demand for recognition. As Christians, it is disorienting to focus on the evil in the world around us—disorienting, because Christians know that God is the true King. They know that he is in control of all things. And yet as they look around, they see a culture that is opposed to God. God did not create brokenness and evil. Christians find it difficult to hold God's control and a chaotic world side-by-side.

When the ruling chaos compels Christians to doubt whether God is in control or not, they go to the Word to be reminded about what is true. God is alive, and he is in control. God is good, and he always does good. And God is working to bring all things into subjection under the Lord's feet. One of the best places to go to renew confidence in the God of gods is the book of Daniel.

Christians have loved the book of Daniel for ages because of stories like the rejection of the king's meat in chapter 1; the interpretation of the king's dream in chapter 2; the fiery furnace in chapter 3; the writing on the wall in chapter 5; and the lion's den in chapter 6. Those are great stories that help to build a Christian's faith, but there is so much

¹Dr. Elwart is Assistant Professor of Biblical Counseling at Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary. He writes of Dr. Compton, "This essay is dedicated to my esteemed professor and colleague, Dr. Bruce Compton, upon his retirement from Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary. He has played a pivotal role in nurturing my love for the Word and inspiring me to understand and teach it with precision. When I began my pastoral ministry, I aspired to preach through the entire Bible. Yet, the complexity of two books—Revelation and Daniel—initially deterred me from tackling them. In my first year as a pastor, I enrolled in Dr. Compton's course on the book of Revelation. Through his meticulous exposition over the semester, I cultivated a deeper appreciation for the text and recognized its blessings as a gift to share with the church. Emboldened by his guidance, I preached through Revelation within a year and, later, through Daniel. To this day, whenever I reflect on the treasures within these books, I am reminded of Dr. Compton's invaluable role in helping me to know, understand, and love them. As he begins this new chapter, I join many others in expressing profound gratitude for his decades of service and in praying that his life's work will continue to inspire future generations of biblical scholars and pastors."

more to the book of Daniel. Chapters 7 through 12 are filled with visions and prophecies of the end times. This essay is designed to survey the book of Daniel and to show that the message of Daniel resonates with believers of all ages.

The Origin and Context of Daniel

Named after the prophet Daniel, the book of Daniel was written by him as well (9:2; 10:2; cf. Matt 24:15).² Daniel recorded events that took place over the course of his seventy years in exile. Outside of this book, the Scriptures do not say much more about him. From 1:3, we know that he had noble birth. He may have even been royalty as well.

The date for Daniel's writing is not clear. However, it must have been at least a short time after the final event in the book, which happened in 536 BC (the first year of Darius's reign, 10:1).³ In order to understand this book more fully, it must be understood in its larger historical context.

Distant History of Judah

God had promised Abraham that through his descendants, all the nations of the earth would be blessed (Gen 12:2). Five hundred years later, Moses would lead Israel out of Egypt to the Promised Land. While Moses was prevented from going in, Joshua led the people in the conquest of Canaan. Few events were greater in Israel's history than the receiving of the Promised Land under Joshua. However, Israel's future was going to be even better, but before it could get better, Israel would make some poor choices that would make things worse. Only one generation after Joshua, the people of Israel lost the land during the time of the Judges. For centuries, Israel failed to obey God.

Around 500 years after Moses, God raised up David as Israel's king. David repossessed the land through battles and reigned over the people of Israel for forty years. The kingdom of Israel was united under King David. Solomon succeeded David as king, but with the death of Solomon, Israel saw approximately 300 years of decline spiritually and otherwise. During the time following Solomon's reign, the kingdom was divided between the northern tribes of Israel and the southern tribes of Judah. The northern kings all did evil in the eyes of the Lord, and the southern kings were generally evil, with an occasional godly king, like Hezekiah.

In 722 BC, the northern kingdom of Israel was defeated by Assyria.

²One unusual feature of the book is that 2:4b–7:28 was written in Aramaic, the language of the Gentiles, while 1:1–2:4a, along with chapters 8 through 12 were written in Hebrew, the language of the Jews. Daniel does not explain why he switches from one language to the other, but most likely he had two audiences in mind, wanting to show that God rules over both the Gentile and the Jewish nations.

³For a recent defense of the traditional view that the prophet Daniel wrote this book, see esp. J. Paul Tanner, *Daniel*, Evangelical Exegetical Commentary (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2020), 37–85.

While this likely came as a great shock to Judah, she remained confident in her resolve to not suffer the same demise. After all, God's temple resided in Judah during this time, in the city of Jerusalem. The prophet Isaiah came along at this time to warn Judah about the imminent exile.

Near History of Judah

In 609 BC, Egypt defeated Judah, killing King Josiah and forcing Judah into a vassal treaty, requiring tribute in exchange for protection, while young Daniel, around 11 years old, lived through this shift.⁴ By 605 BC, Babylon, under Nebuchadnezzar's rising leadership, challenged Egypt and Assyria, defeating them and reshaping the region's power dynamics as Judah faced new pressures.⁵

On his way to Egypt, Nebuchadnezzar would attack Judah, making Jehoiakim his vassal and Daniel and others his captives. These captive young men would be placed under a three-year training program that was apparently designed to assimilate these them into pagan Babylonian culture. Jehoiakim would later rebel, but Babylon would reinvade Judah, apparently taking Jehoiakim back to Babylon.⁶

In 586 BC, Nebuchadnezzar sent in troops to finish Judah off, killing thousands, destroying the temple, and bringing back captors. Judah would be exiled from their land under Babylonian rule for 70 years, just as the Lord had promised them. Nebuchadnezzar's rule was planned by God as a response to Judah's rebellion against him.⁷

Daniel lived through all of these battles, but God would use Daniel to point the Babylonian king to God. By the end of Daniel 2, King Nebuchadnezzar was bowing to Daniel, one of his captives (2:46–47).⁸ By chapter 4, Nebuchadnezzar was acknowledging God as the only true God (4:1–3). In 562 BC, the Babylonian empire began to fade away with the death of their king. By 539 BC, the empire would completely collapse, which gave way for the Medes and the Persians to take over.

The Purpose of Daniel

Daniel writes his prophecy for three main reasons.⁹ First, Daniel

⁴Stephen R. Miller, *Daniel*, The New American Commentary (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1994), 43–44.

⁵See Tanner, *Daniel*, 85–88.

⁶Miller, *Daniel*, 43; Tanner, *Daniel*, 92–93.

⁷Miller, *Daniel*, 43–44.

⁸Mark Dever, *The Message of the Old Testament: Promises Made* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006), 659.

⁹In his commentary, Leon Wood offers four purposes for the book of Daniel. First, it illustrates what true dedication to God looks like and how God responds to those who are committed to him. Second, it shows God's interest and care for his chosen people, even when they are being punished for sin. Third, it shows that God

sought to show his readers God's faithfulness to his people even while they were being judged for their sin. Second, Daniel wrote to show believers what it looks like to live faithful lives in a faithless culture. Third, Daniel wanted to show his readers what will happen in the end times.¹⁰

The Central Idea of Daniel

The book of Daniel is about disputed sovereignty. Who is really in control? Who is the great king? Nebuchadnezzar thought he was the great king. As he was walking around on his roof reflecting on his power and rule, he asked, "Is this not Babylon the great, which I myself have built as a royal residence by the might of my power and for the glory of my majesty?" (4:30). Nebuchadnezzar would be brought low after his expression of pride, and then he would die in 562 BC.

Eventually Nabonidus would be king of Babylon, but he would suffer a crushing defeat at the hands of King Cyrus of Persia. A few days after that battle, Nabonidus's son, Belshazzar, invited 1,000 of his nobles to a party at the royal palace (5:1).¹¹ During the feast Persia encamped outside the city in order to plan and prepare for their attack, and yet Babylon's king ignored the threat, believing the city to be impregnable. The city of Babylon was protected by a double wall, with the outer wall being 20-foot thick and 40-foot high. The city was guarded by security towers every 160 feet. Additionally, Babylon had a river that flowed nearby that provided an endless supply of water. Babylon was also known to have a supply of food within the city that would last them for a few years.

Did Belshazzar use this occasion to renew Babylon's loyalty to their Babylonian gods which had allegedly been ignored for the latter years of Nebuchadnezzar's reign? Perhaps he thought that the steady decline of the Babylonian empire was due in part to their acknowledging the God of Judah, while ignoring the gods of Babylon that had apparently gotten them to rise to such heights. Whatever the case, at this feast, Belshazzar and the nobles paid homage to the gods of gold, silver, bronze, iron, wood, and stone. He also showed disdain for the God of Judah by

had not forgotten them even as they experienced the punishment for their sin. Fourth, it gives information relative to the last days (*A Commentary on Daniel* [Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1998], 23).

¹⁰Students of the Scripture might think that the main points of biblical revelation about the end times come from Revelation and other NT books. However, without the book of Daniel, our understanding of the end times would be incomplete. Daniel records prophecies about the Messiah's first coming, the rise of the little horn during the tribulation period, events surrounding the Messiah's second coming, the fall of the little horn, the establishment of Christ's kingdom, the resurrection of the OT saints, and the Great White Throne Judgment.

¹¹The exact purpose of this banquet is not explained in Scripture. It could have been offered in an effort to boost morale and to forget the trouble of the invading armies of Persia. It could also be that Belshazzar was moving quickly to proclaim himself as king, making the banquet a kind of coronation. Another possibility is that this was an annual festival that just happened to fall at this time (Miller, *Daniel*, 151–52).

profanely using the goblets that Nebuchadnezzar had seized from the temple of God in Judah. The use of these vessels to defy God was not an accident. Daniel records Belshazzar's indictment in 5:22–23:

Yet you, his son, Belshazzar, have not humbled your heart, even though you knew all this, but you have exalted yourself against the Lord of heaven; and they have brought the vessels of His house before you, and you and your nobles, your wives and your concubines have been drinking wine from them; and you have praised the gods of silver and gold, of bronze, iron, wood and stone, which do not see, hear or understand. But the God in whose hand are your life-breath and all your ways, you have not glorified.

Later in the prophecy, Daniel warned of the little horn and his rise to power. The little horn too thinks he is the great king. He “will do as he pleases, and will exalt and magnify himself above every god and will speak monstrous things against the God of gods; and he will prosper until the indignation is finished” (11:36). These three kings failed to acknowledge that their authority was derived authority.¹² It was given to them by God. They also failed to acknowledge that their authority was only temporary. Each of their kingdoms would come to an end.

However, there was one king that Daniel records who would be different. This king would have an unending kingdom. Daniel calls him the Son of Man¹³ in 7:13–14:

I kept looking in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven One like a Son of Man was coming, and He came up to the Ancient of Days and was presented before Him. And to Him was given dominion, glory and a kingdom, that all the peoples, nations and men of every language might serve Him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion which will not pass away; and His kingdom is one which will not be destroyed.

The book of Daniel records a few historic kings who rose to power and just as quickly fell from power. His prophecy also includes the promise of the greatest fallen king who would ever rule the world, known as the little horn, or as the book of Revelation describes him, the antichrist.¹⁴ From this book, readers know that his rule will only be for seven years (9:27).¹⁵ But the rule of King Jesus will be unprecedented in human history. It will be universal and everlasting. He is the one that believers should revere. The central idea of the book of Daniel is this:

¹²This is true of Nebuchadnezzar during the height of his reign over Babylon. Of course, God causes him to come around and acknowledge that God alone is God and that all of Nebuchadnezzar's rule is under the rule of God (4:1–3).

¹³This assumes the traditional view that the “Son of Man” in Daniel 7 refers to the Messiah who we now know to be Jesus (see Tanner, *Daniel*, 426–43).

¹⁴For a fuller discussion on the little horn being equated with the antichrist of Revelation, see esp. Tanner, *Daniel*, 411–15.

¹⁵See Tanner, *Daniel*, 754–67.

because God's kingdom cannot fall, believers must be faithful to God even in the midst of a faithless culture. Each part of this theme will be explored briefly.

First, God is the true king and his kingdom cannot fall.¹⁶ The other kings would reign for a period of time, but their rule was only temporary. Isaiah 40:15 speaks of the nations of the world being like dust on the scales before God. He simply blows, and they are gone.

Second, believers must be faithful to God even in the midst of a faithless culture. Daniel records stories of himself and his three friends and shows his readers how to be faithful to God in the midst of a faithless culture. In chapter 1, they rejected the king's meat. In chapter 2, Daniel stood up against the false claims of the gods of this world. In chapter 3, Daniel obeyed God even in the face of death. In chapter 6, Daniel again had to remain true to God in the face of death. In chapters 7 and 8, the little horn wars against the saints. And the motivation for believers for that time, and for the end times, and for all time is found in 11:32, "the people who know their God will display great strength, and take action" because they know that God's kingdom cannot fail. Daniel and his friends present a godly paradigm for believers of all time to follow.

Conclusion

Daniel was written for believers of all ages so that they would see the power of earthly rulers in their proper context. Christians can learn two main things from this prophecy. God is to be feared above all, and believers need to pursue faithfulness to God no matter what.

A Call to Fear the Ultimate King

The prophecy of Daniel is a call for believers to fear the ultimate King. If God and his promises were not real, then these earthly kings who rise to power and fall to their death would be a person's greatest fear.¹⁷ But Christians should not fall into that trap. Christians should fear the God of gods. Of course, Christians may be intimidated by the rulers of this world, but the fear should be tempered by a realization that those rulers are only there for a time. God uses each ruler to accomplish exactly what he wants. He raises up some, and he takes down others (2:21). Christians should remind themselves that the worst thing that any enemy can do is to kill their body. Jesus said, "Do not fear him who can kill your body, but fear him who can kill both your body and soul in hell forever" (Matt 10:28). Christians must have properly

¹⁶See 2:20–21, 44; 4:34–35; 7:25–27.

¹⁷One author puts it this way: "Every king believes that he is all-powerful and that his kingdom will endure. Yet God in His gracious and powerful sovereignty helps each king slowly to recognize that this is not the case, but that God's own kingdom alone will endure. God is the mighty king who has no equal and who judges all" (Dever, *The Message of the Old Testament*, 661).

ordered fears. God is the King of Kings, and no one can match his greatness. Believers are to fear God above all else.

A Call to Uncompromising Obedience to God

Daniel and his three friends are great examples for believers. They show what it looks like to be faithful in a faithless culture. The result of Daniel's faithfulness was that he lived a long and prosperous life. That blessing given to Daniel does not serve as a guarantee for all believers that they will live long lives if they choose to stand their ground when the tide of culture crashes against them. Readers know this is not a universal expectation because the Scriptures are full of examples of people who followed in the footsteps of Daniel and still died young, like John the Baptist, Jesus, James, Peter, and hundreds of others. The point is that whether God grants a person long life or not, Christians must seek to live in faithfulness to God.¹⁸ Each person must make it a priority to be faithful all the way to the end and to leave to God to order and provide. And through it all, he will remain faithful.

Daniel is an excellent book about disputed sovereignty. But this dispute is only an apparent one. Believers know who the real Sovereign is. And one day it will be clear to all who he is, because there is coming a day when the Father will hand the keys of the kingdom to his Son, and every knee will bow to Jesus Christ as Lord. And every tongue will confess that he is Lord to the glory of God the Father (Phil 2:9–11). Charles Wesley (1707–1788) captured the idea of the book of Daniel pretty well when he wrote, “His kingdom cannot fail. He rules over earth and heaven; the keys of death and hell are to our Jesus given. Lift up your heart, lift up your voice rejoice, again, I say, rejoice.”¹⁹

¹⁸Dever helpfully applies this idea, “Christian, be personally uncompromising about obedience to God, even if it brings you into conflict with your ruler or your boss. It is dangerous, but it is a good witness. It shows the world and your boss what God is like. You may be delivered, as Daniel was in this book. You may be rewarded for your principles, as Daniel was in this book. And you may even help your boss not to continue suffering under his or her illusions” (Dever, *The Message of the Old Testament*, 665).

¹⁹Charles Wesley, “Rejoice, the Lord is King,” *Majesty Hymns*, ed. Frank Garlock, Shelley Hamilton, and Majesty Music (Greenville, SC: Majesty Music, 1997), no. 1.