

A LOOK AT A BOOK: Daniel

May 25, 2014

The one constant in our lives is change. We know it in every sphere of our experience. We know it in our families. We know it in our jobs. We even know it in our churches. And to be honest, some of these changes at home, at church, and at work make us nervous.

Change is everywhere and change is difficult. Sir Hugh Casson, a prominent British architect, noted some years ago that the British “love permanence more than they love beauty.” Change is hard on more than just the British. Alvin Toffler summed up our reaction to increasingly rapid changes when he wrote, “Man has a limited biological capacity for change. When this capacity is overwhelmed, the capacity is in future shock.”

Still, such change is unavoidable. As the Greek philosopher Heraclitus said, “There is nothing permanent except change.” And we must admit, change is not always good; it is sometimes dangerous.

So how do we survive constantly changing circumstances, particularly adverse changes? In such a world, what hope do we have for survival?

Introducing Daniel

We come to the last of our studies of the Major Prophets of the Old Testament, as we turn to the book of Daniel.

A quick summary of the book of Daniel: It is much shorter than the other three Major Prophets, containing only twelve chapters. The first six chapters of the book consist of six stories (one per chapter) written in the third person and mainly in Aramaic. The first four chapters occur during the reign of Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar, chapter 5 transpires during the reign of Belshazzar, and chapter 6 happens during the reign of Darius the Mede. The latter six chapters – chapters 7-12 – consist mostly of visions Daniel has about the future. They are written in the first person and largely in Hebrew. So Daniel says, “I” in those chapters. Both the stories in the first half and the visions in the second half are well-known to many people, and both halves largely proceed in chronological order.

Chapter 1 contains the famous story about the four young Hebrew boys who refuse to eat the king's food set before them since it is defiled, according to the standards of Jewish food laws. Though their stance is risky, Daniel and his three friends receive an exemption, and they end up prospering as a result.

In chapter 2, King Nebuchadnezzar has a dream he wants interpreted, yet he insists that his wise men must interpret the dream without being told what has happened in the dream. That way Nebuchadnezzar will know they are not lying. None of the Babylonian wise men can give him either the dream or the interpretation, but Daniel can. God gives him both.

Chapter 3 recounts the famous story of Daniel's three Hebrew friends who refuse to bow when Nebuchadnezzar puts up his great idol. So the king throws them into a fiery furnace, but they survive.

In chapter 4, Nebuchadnezzar writes a letter to his whole empire confessing his own ignorance and arrogance. He acknowledges that he had presumed to be the one who rebuilt Babylon. Yet God had humbled him through an illness, and he had come to see that all authority and power belong to God alone.

Chapter 5 tells about the riotous feast for pagan gods held by King Belshazzar. Belshazzar and his party are drinking wine from goblets taken from the Lord's temple in Jerusalem when handwriting appears on the wall. Daniel is brought into the party to interpret the handwriting, and he tells the king that he has been weighed in the balance and found wanting. That night Belshazzar is slain.

Chapter 6 contains what may be the most famous story of all, and it takes place toward the end of Daniel's life, during the reign of Darius the Mede when Daniel is probably in his eighties. Daniel is thrown into a den of lions, where he remains overnight. Yet God closes the mouths of the lions and delivers Daniel.

The last six chapters consist mainly of Daniel's visions. Chapters 7 and 8 contain visions Daniel has during Belshazzar's reign about the rise and fall of earthly kingdoms. Chapter 9 records a long prayer Daniel utters during Darius's reign. Knowing that the seventy years of exile for the children of Israel are almost over, he prays for God's deliverance. Chapters 10, 11, and 12 present another vision of Daniel's about the end of time.

Notice three things: first, the changing kings; second, the unchanging God; and finally, Daniel the survivor. And let's see what we can learn about our own survival and change.

Changing Kings

The story of Daniel is set against the backdrop of the splendor of a Babylonian renaissance under Nebuchadnezzar in the sixth century B.C. He was one of the most important figures in vitalizing the thousand-year-old Babylonian empire that had been in decline for centuries. His renaissance was marked by power and magnificence, as country after country in the ancient Near East fell to Babylonian military might.

We know from extrabiblical sources that Nebuchadnezzar laid siege to the nation of Tyre for thirteen years, so adamant was he about not allowing any nation to stand outside his rule. He even invaded the distant, decaying, but still powerful Egyptian empire. Under Nebuchadnezzar the Babylonian empire reached the largest size it would ever attain.

We get a taste of Nebuchadnezzar's pride over his rebuilding of Babylon in chapter 4. As the king walks on the roof of his royal palace and beholds the city before him, he boasts, "Is not this the great Babylon I have built as the royal residence, by my mighty power and for the glory of my majesty" (4:30). Archaeologists have shown us that Nebuchadnezzar was not simply full of hot air. He had indeed transformed Babylon into the greatest city of the ancient world. The Greek historian Herodotus asserted, "In addition to its enormous size, it surpasses in splendor any city of the known world." The city had magnificent walls with eight great gates. The entrances were bedecked in vivid colors – bright red, white, and blue. Great avenues sixty-five feet wide led up to these gates. Nebuchadnezzar built tall temples, perhaps as many as fifty, and some of them were probably three hundred feet high.

As part of their push toward general cultural renaissance, the Babylonian kings pushed to reinvigorate their religion as well. Whenever the Babylonians conquered another nation, they assumed that their gods were superior to the gods of the conquered nation. They would then bring implements of worship from the conquered land back and place them in their own temples in order to indicate subjection, just as a king might place articles from a conquered king's palace in his own palace. We see at the very beginning of Daniel's book that the Babylonians had done this with the Israelites: "And the Lord delivered Jehoiakim, king of Judah, into [Nebuchadnezzar's] hand, along with some of the articles from the

temple of God. These he carried off to the temple of his god in Babylonia and put in the treasure house of his god” (1:2).

The great Nebuchadnezzar, after a spectacular forty-three-year reign, died in 562 B.C. Nebuchadnezzar was then succeeded by other rulers, some of whom are named in this book: Belshazzar, Darius the Mede, Cyrus the Persian. These rulers changed, and other unnamed rulers came and went in the years covered through the course of this book. “Time, like an ever-rolling stream, bears all its sons away.”

In fact, in chapter 2, Nebuchadnezzar himself dreams about the passing nature of leaders. In his dream, he sees a large and dazzling statue of a man built with different materials, which then crumbles when struck by a rock. The dream troubles him greatly, but he cannot understand it. Neither can any of his wise men. Daniel alone can explain the dream to him: Nebuchadnezzar’s kingdom will be succeeded by another one, and another one, and another one, and still another one – with each of the statue’s materials representing a different empire. Finally, all these worldly kingdoms will come to naught because of God’s hand and the establishing of his everlasting kingdom.

The vision of great beasts in chapter 7 and the vision of a ram and a goat in chapter 8, all of which represent kingdoms, reinforce this same theme. Kingdoms will rise and dominate the world stage; and then just as surely as they have risen, they will decline. The visions in chapters 10, 11, and 12 all reinforce this same truth.

Kingdom after kingdom in the book of Daniel, including the most powerful kingdoms with the most powerful kings, seem to bear signs over them that say, “This too shall pass.”

In the event you are ambitious for power, remember both the passing nature of power and the judgment that falls upon everyone who seeks power. Remember that you too will be replaced. Know that what you *want* indicates more of who you are than what you *have*. Kings come. And kings go. As surely as their reigns commence, they will conclude.

God Unchanging

The Unchanging Sovereign – God.

After God reveals Nebuchadnezzar’s dream and its meaning to Daniel in chapter 2, Daniel prays (2:20-23).

Notice that Daniel begins this prayer by expressly praising God for his sovereignty over kings. After all, the dream God had revealed and interpreted for Daniel not only exposed the passing nature of every king's greatness; it also showed that every kingdom will end "not by human hands," Daniel said twice, but by the hand of God (2:34, 45)! "[T]he God of heaven will set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed, nor will it be left to another people. It will crush all those kingdoms and bring them to an end, but it will itself endure forever" (2:44).

Daniel then returns to Nebuchadnezzar to announce the meaning of the dream. "You, O king, are the king of kings," he begins. And, of course, Nebuchadnezzar was. As emperor of Babylon, he had many sovereigns and kings under him. Daniel continues, "The God of heaven has given you dominion and power and might and glory; in your hands he has placed mankind and the beasts of the field and the birds of the air. Wherever they live, he has made you ruler over them all" (2:37-38). Daniel's flattery of the sovereign is quite artful! He celebrates the king's sovereignty, but he celebrates it all as a gift of an even greater sovereign. Daniel well understands the dream he is interpreting for Nebuchadnezzar.

After Daniel tells Nebuchadnezzar his dream and then interprets it for him, we read, "Then King Nebuchadnezzar fell prostrate before Daniel and...said to Daniel, "Surely your God is the God of gods and the Lord of kings and a revealer of mysteries, for you were able to reveal this mystery"" (2:46a, 47). Nebuchadnezzar, the mightiest of kings, falls down before a man his troops had captured and led into exile, and then he acknowledges the God of this man to be in authority over him and his gods! What a picture the bowing Nebuchadnezzar makes for where truth authority lies.

In chapter 3, after the three Hebrew men are preserved amid the fiery furnace, Nebuchadnezzar again confesses, "no other god can save in this way" (3:29).

In chapter 4, Nebuchadnezzar himself writes a letter to "the peoples, nations and men of every language, who live in all the world," confessing his own ignorance and recounting a dream he had had, along with his interpretation and the story of its fulfillment (4:1-2). In his dream, says Nebuchadnezzar in his letter, he had seen a mighty tree that grew tall and was then felled. A heavenly messenger told him that the tree had been felled "so that the living may know that the Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and gives them to anyone he wishes and sets over them the lowliest of men" (4:17). Daniel then interpreted this dream for him, telling him that he would be brought down from his high place. Moreover, Daniel had said that he would not be restored until "you acknowledge that Heaven rules"

(4:26). Sure enough, twelve months later Nebuchadnezzar went mad and was driven away from his throne for a time, during which time he lived like an animal. Finally, says Nebuchadnezzar's letter, God restored his sanity and his throne, prompting him finally to acknowledge God:

I praised the Most High; I honored and glorified him who lives forever. His dominion is an eternal dominion; his kingdom endures from generation to generation. All the peoples of the earth are regarded as nothing. He does as he pleases with the powers of heaven and the peoples of the earth (4:34b-35a).

In chapter 5, God once again demonstrates that all kings will pass, as compared to the one true and eternal Sovereign, God. One of Nebuchadnezzar's successors, Belshazzar, holds a banquet for a thousand of his nobles. In the midst of their feast, Belshazzar gives orders to bring in the gold and silver goblets taken from the temple in Jerusalem. Drinking wine from these goblets, Belshazzar and his guests praise "the gods of gold and silver, of bronze, iron, wood and stone" (5:4). Suddenly, a hand appears and writes words on the wall that no one can read or interpret. Daniel is brought in to interpret the writing, and Belshazzar offers to reward Daniel, perhaps thinking he can placate him and his God. Daniel answers the king (5:17-21).

Daniel proceeds to tell Belshazzar that he has not humbled himself like his father, that he has "set himself up against the Lord of heaven" (5:23), that he has been weighed in God's scales, that he has been found wanting, and that his kingdom will be given away. That very night, Belshazzar is killed and someone else assumes "sovereign control" of Babylon.

King Darius, too, would eventually confess the eternal, unchanging nature of God's sovereignty. The story, in chapter 6, is familiar enough: jealous members of Darius's government set a legal trap for Daniel by persuading the king to implement a law that no one could pray to anyone but him, the king. When Daniel violates this rule by continuing to pray to the real God, these administrators manage to have him thrown into a den of lions. Yet when Daniel is drawn unharmed out of the lions' den the next day, Darius, like Nebuchadnezzar before him, confesses, "I issue a decree that in every part of my kingdom people must fear and reverence the God of Daniel. For he is the living God and he endures forever; his kingdom will not be destroyed, his dominion will never end" (6:26).

Every king originally 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.

In chapter 7, Daniel is given a vision of the true Throne Room (7:9-10).

Still, some sovereigns never learn. In chapter 11, Daniel sees a future king who "will do as he pleases. He will exalt and magnify himself above every god and will say unheard-of things against the God of gods" (11:36).

The second half of the book of Daniel is often described by scholars as "apocalyptic," like the book of Revelation in the New Testament. Apocalyptic books, through their use of dramatic imagery and emphasis on ultimate outcomes, would be written to provide a clear look at God's overarching sovereignty in the world. Typically they would be written in times when God's rule and power looked most invisible.

Daniel the Faithful

But we must not forget the title character of the book: Daniel. We have said very little about him. Daniel was probably taken into captivity in 605 B.C., as part of the first wave of exiles to Babylon, ten years before Ezekiel went and almost twenty before Jerusalem finally fell. He and several fellow Hebrews were placed in the king's circles at the book's beginning, and that was a dangerous place to be. Perhaps you have heard the phrase, "You play with the big boys and you'll get hurt." He was playing with some of the biggest boys around Nebuchadnezzar and his court.

It is in chapter 1 that we first learn that Nebuchadnezzar decides to bring some young, able Israelites into his court to serve the kingdom. The court officials set the diet for these men, but Daniel and his friends ask permission not to defile themselves with the king's food.

How would you have counseled them? "Oh, Daniel," you are being a big rigid over this food matter. You're just a young exile. It's a great privilege, you know, that you've been brought into the court. Think of the people you'll meet. Think of the influence you'll have."

How would you have advised him in chapters 2 or 4, when the God-given interpretation of the king's dream exalted God's kingdom and put down

Nebuchadnezzar's? "Oh, Daniel, Daniel, you don't need to explain the dream to the king quite that way. He has not had a good morning. You won't accomplish anything with that tone."

Or, what would you have said to him when chapter 6's edict came that he could no longer pray to his own God, but only to Darius? "Daniel, you can still pray in your heart to the Lord. God doesn't care about your bodily posture. He knows the truth of your heart, Daniel."

And finally, I can just hear some false counselor speaking to the young men as they stood before the idol of Nebuchadnezzar in chapter 3: "Oh, come on, just bow down. You don't have to bow down in your heart. It's just your body. You won't really be worshiping this idol."

There is no compromise here in the book of Daniel. Some critics don't like this about Daniel – either the man or his book. They read the book, and Daniel leaves them cold. They say he looks like a cardboard character. "There's no depth of development," they say. "No sin, you know. With Joseph, you've got his ego. With Jacob, deception. With Moses, even murder! But with Daniel, nothing. He just does the right thing all the time." But the point of the book is not Daniel's *sinfulness*, but his *steadfastness*.

In this book, Daniel survives the deportation to Babylon, the reigns of Nebuchadnezzar, Belshazzar, Darius the Mede, and Cyrus the Persian (6:28). He survives everything from the crisis of whether to eat the king's food in chapter 1 to the crisis of being thrown to the lions in chapter 6. He even survives the end of the Babylonian empire itself as the Persians enter it. And I am sure there were more crises of which we have no record.

Perseverance. Endurance. Daniel is an example of survival.

Daniel would die, of course, like all other mortals. Yet the last verse of the book expressed Daniel's final hope. God says to Daniel through a messenger, "As for you, go your way till the end. You will rest, and then at the end of the days you will rise to receive your allotted inheritance" (12:13).

Daniel was told that all of God's kingly power would one day be concentrated in the hands of one who was "like a son of man." Earlier we saw the Ancient of Days sitting upon his throne. But Daniel's vision did not stop there (7:13-14).

Jesus Christ, born to the virgin Mary, is this Son of Man. In Christ, God put on human flesh and came to declare the beginning of his new kingdom within the hearts of his people.

Mark Dever, *The Message of the Old Testament*