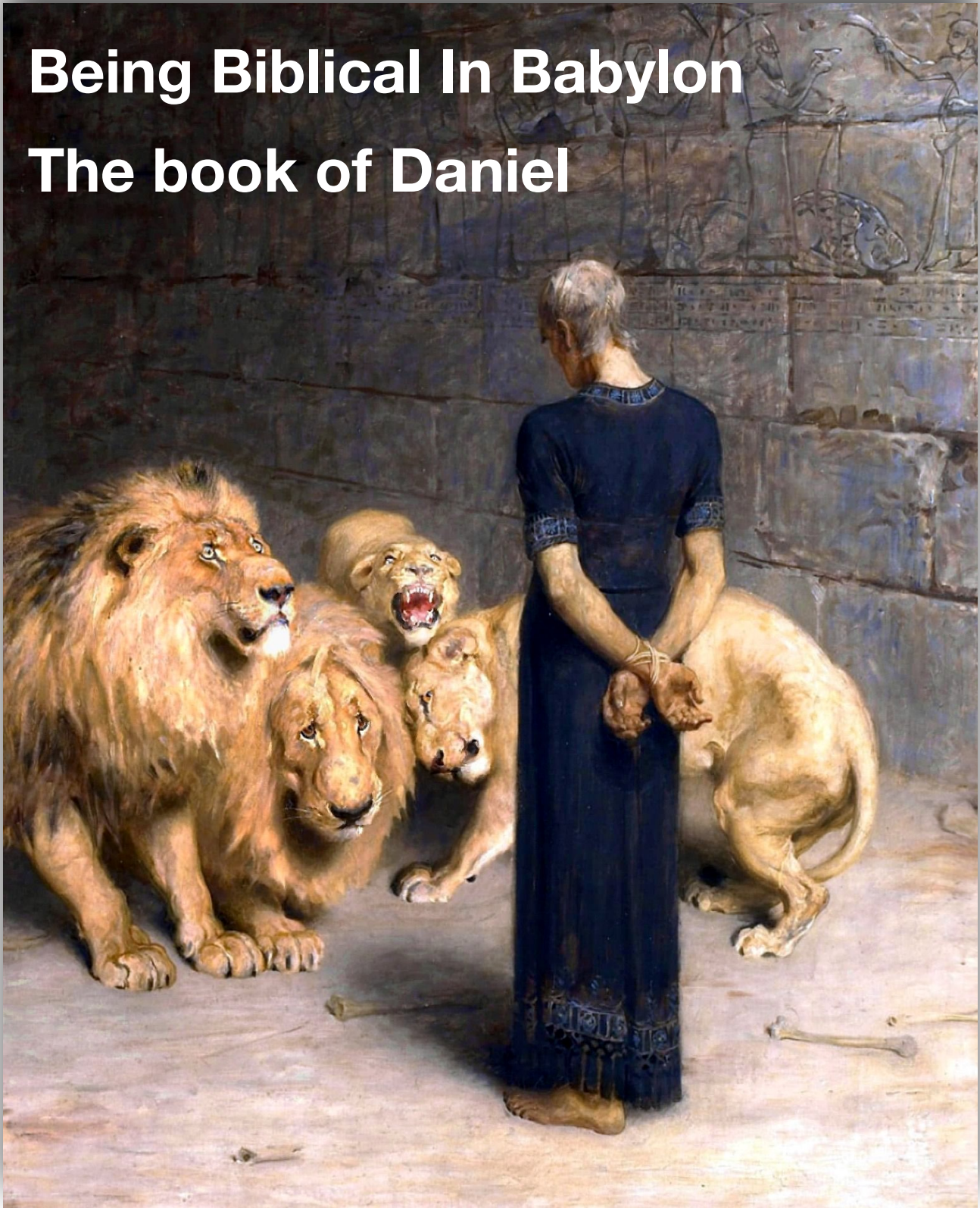


Being Biblical In Babylon

The book of Daniel



Study Notes for individuals and Life groups
St. John's Brunswick West, August 2026.

WARNING

A note on how to use this book

DO NOT TRY TO ANSWER ALL THE QUESTIONS

DECIDE WHAT QUESTIONS ARE MEANINGFUL FOR YOU OR YOUR LIFE GROUP

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The book of Daniel

→ *And indeed it so came to pass, that our nation suffered these things under Antiochus Epiphanes, according to Daniel's vision, and what he wrote many years before they came to pass. In the very same manner Daniel also wrote concerning the Roman government, and that our country should be made desolate by them. ... by the forementioned predictions of Daniel, those men seem to me very much to err from the truth, who determine that God exercises no providence over human affairs; for if that were the case, that the world went on by mechanical necessity, we should not see that all things would come to pass according to his prophecy.*

- *Flavius Josephus: The antiquities of the Jews (c 93 AD)*

We have been given the book of Daniel to teach us how to live in cultures that can be hostile to belief in the God of the Bible. Daniel is set after the warnings of the Old Covenant had come upon God's people (Deuteronomy 28), when the people of God had no land, kingdom, temple, sacrifice or leadership. It was impossible for them to obey the Law God had given through Moses because that law required all the things they no longer had. In exile in Babylon, the question became, how do we live trusting the Lord God, while living through the curses of the law of Moses, in a place where even the pavement stones had prayers to pagan gods inscribed on them.

This is may be one reason why, in the Hebrew Scriptures, Daniel is not grouped with the prophets but with the wisdom writings (with Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Job, and Song of Songs). However, while wisdom literature often deals with individual lives and personal lessons Daniel also deals with the large scale rise and fall of empires and the work of God in the broader political world. Daniel teaches us the God of Israel is Lord of all the world not just one nation. It teaches God's people what things, in a hostile culture, they will need to stand against, comment or advise upon, or simply overlook. It teaches us practical lessons in spiritual discernment, wisdom, supernatural experience, and effective prayer, action and thought.

The book of Daniel also picks up and develops apocalyptic ideas from Isaiah (e.g. chapters 27 & 28) and other prophets to teach us about the spiritual realities occurring behind and within our political histories. The fall of Jerusalem (587 BC), the fall of Babylon (539 BC), the fall of Persia, the division of the Greek empire after Alexander's death (333 BC), the rule of Judea by Antioches Epiphanes IV (167-164 BC) the rise of Rome as well as the beginning of the end times and the end of the end times (e.g. 7:12, 9:24-27) are featured in this style of writing and prophesy.

A theological point

Some of us will have seen the film 'The Odyssey' about the mythical journey of the Greek General, Odysseus back from his conquest of Troy to his home Ithaca. How, along the way he meets gods like the Cyclops, Polyphemus (the witch), the Sirens, Calypso and Hades. What you may have noticed is how these gods were just like us, they too were creatures with desires and fears who could be harmed even though their life and power is longer and larger than human beings. This is because Ancient Greek and Babylonian world views were materialistic or naturalistic. That is, the universe was the eternal absolute, chaos was the default, the gods were birthed from the chaos and gave rise to some order along with the other gods. These gods compete with each other as the personification of natural, material and mental forces. There is no overriding mind or order in the cosmos to unite it. Nature is not a universe but a multiverse of competing forces where even the gods are products of nature only made of different stuff to us. That means, for all the temples and spirituality of Babylon, it is at heart, a materialist and relativist culture where political force is what unifies.

In contrast, the monotheism we are given in the Bible, that is, a belief in one unifying God who stands outside his creation, is something radically different to the Greek or Babylonian understandings of reality. This could not have evolved from polytheism because monotheism says the meaning of the system

lies outside the system. Therefore the meaning of the cosmos lies outside itself. It does not create itself or give purpose to itself. The Bible reveals the transcendental God, the God who stands outside the cosmos and creates it, and who makes it possible to believe that life has a meaning, not merely a mythic or even a scientific explanation. The Biblical God gives us a universe that is itself a creature.

Themes in Daniel

There are two themes that run through Daniel. One is that, since the exile and the end of the Old Covenant of Moses, God's people are rescued *through* their trials not *from* them. This is true in the first half of the book (chapters 1-6) where Daniel and his friends were in fear of their lives and, despite their great wisdom, could have died for their loyalty to God except for God rescuing them in the middle of trouble.

This theme is also true for the second half of Daniel (chapters 8-12) where we have described God's people, despite their wisdom, suffering and often dying for their loyalty to God. They are finally rescued and vindicated in the resurrection of the dead in chapter 12. They are rescued *through* the days of trouble, not *from* them.

The other theme is that the powers set against God will be used by God to achieve his purposes. Even the fierce opposition to God's people seen in Antiochus IV and all he foreshadows is used in Daniel 12 to purify and refine the people of God. On the ground we may see defeat. In heaven God sees his people being made spotless by persistent courage and faith that he responds to.

What strikes me about these themes is how they contain the shape of the cross of Jesus. Jesus told us we would be in the world and not of the world, that we are to take up our cross and follow him because Jesus was not rescued from trouble, but through it. More, he won our rescue by going through our deepest trouble - our sin, our alienation from God. Likewise, the powers of evil sought to destroy Jesus. The worst human beings could be in political cowardice, judicial corruption, execution by torture - all designed to belittle and destroy God in Christ Jesus, became the source of our salvation and the source of the final defeat of evil. The end of sin and the death of death. It was from the cross, not a throne, that Jesus declared: "It is finished."

An historical question

The book of Daniel sets itself in the sixth century BC and claims to have been written at that time (e.g. 7:1, 9:1-3) but the majority of commentators from the eighteenth century AD onwards claim the book was written in the later half of the second century BC. There are two core reasons given for this: first, that the prophecies in Daniel about the rise and fall of empires between the 6th and 2nd centuries BC are too accurate. Second, that the original Arabic best suits a second century BC setting.

A few problems with re-setting the history of Daniel.

- There is no record before the Roman writer, Porphyry in the 4th century AD, of anyone suggesting a second century BC date for the book of Daniel
- More recent discoveries suggest that the Arabic of Daniel is more in keeping with what we now know about sixth century usage than with the second century BC. (See more recent commentaries for details).
- In the 1940's the discovery of the dead sea scrolls brought to light copies and fragments of the book of Daniel that had been copied out late in the second century BC. We know that for a work to become accepted as scripture took time. For example, the works of prophets would often have to wait until at least part of their words had proved true. This is why Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Isaiah

were not widely accepted as true prophets during their lifetimes but subsequent events vindicated them. Therefore, it is unlikely a book would be accepted as scripture in less than a lifetime if it was actually composed as a myth after the fall of Antiochus in 164 BC.

- There are prophecies in Daniel that go past a second century date. For example, the coming of the Kingdom of God after the collapse of the Greek Empire and the rising of the empire that will supplant it. It is no accident that Luke sets the birth of Jesus in the early years of Augustus, the first Roman Emperor.
- Daniel is not the only Old Testament book to provide accurate prophesy. The New Testament writers often wrote of prophecies fulfilled in the life and death of Jesus (e.g Isaiah 8-9, 53, Psalm 22, Zechariah 9).
- The prophecies of Daniel are not as historically precise as is claimed. For example, if the prophesy from 11:31 to 12:3 is meant to encourage the Hebrew people living in the second century BC by giving them a time frame for the end of Seleucid persecution under Antiochus, and the coming of the resurrection of the dead, then it was obviously wrong. If that section is about Antiochus, then the time frame of three and a half years was not kept and the details of his life are wrong. But, according to Daniel 12, this obscuring of history is deliberate. As Jesus later points out (Matthew 24), the prophecies in Daniel do not relate *only* to the Kingdoms that arose between the exile and the coming of the Kingdom of God in Jesus Christ (Daniel 9:24-27). Those empires were also signs of the *types* of empires that will rule before the coming of the Son of Man on the clouds of heaven (Daniel 7:2-8, Matthew 26:64, Revelation 18 & 19).
- The circumstances of the Hebrews in the sixth century BC were very different to Hebrew lives in the second century BC. In Daniel the people had no homeland, Jerusalem was a pile of rubble, the prophets had encouraged them to seek the good of the empire to which they have been exiled (Jeremiah 27). The Hebrew leadership that remained set examples of loyalty to the Babylonian and Persian Empires. Likewise, the stories of the conversion of Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon and the legal status of Judaism under Darius/Cyrus is the opposite of the Maccabean experience of Antiochus IV in the second century BC.
- Theologically it is claimed the book of Daniel is a parable constructed to comfort the Hebrews who were traumatised by the persecutions under Antiochus Epiphanes IV when he ruled over Judea from 171 to 164 BC. This idea is sometimes then applied by recommending that believers today copy this style of creative story telling, weaving God into the history of our lives to help us be comforted in our hardships. There are two problems with this idea:
 - First, once we give ourselves permission to create our own revelation, without attachment to historical events, we either end up with traditions that only specialists can tell us are acceptable or, we end up in confusion where any idea of God is as good as another. Thoughtful people would want to avoid this relativism. Practical people will want to avoid being gullible and believing myths.
 - Second, there is no evidence that ordinary people, in extreme circumstances, are more likely to be encouraged by made up stories than we are. Instead, made up stories that offer false hope for our sufferings would be read as a mockery of our pain. We want justice for real wrongs done to us, not wishful thinking. The idea also goes against what Daniel actually teaches, that under the rule of empires that used mythology (Babylon, Persia, Greece) the God of Daniel is praised by two Kings (Nebuchadnezzar and Darius/Cyrus) precisely because he acts and saves in history, in fact, not in myth. This is what makes the Lord unusual amongst the gods of the ancient near east. He is not a myth to explain natural forces or to justify Royal power - he is the living God who is beyond the created order (see the hymns in Daniel 4 & 6).

An outline of Daniel

Here is one possible outline of the book of Daniel from John Goldingay that shows us parallels in the book that can help us to get an overview of its meaning.

1. Exile and the questions it raises: story. (God's people)
2. A vision of four empires. (Dreams of the end of human kingdoms)
3. A trial of faithfulness and the following deliverance. (Living in two kingdoms)
4. An omen interpreted and a king challenged and chastised.
5. An omen interpreted and a king challenged then deposed.
6. A trial of faithfulness and the following deliverance. (Living in two kingdoms)
7. A vision of four empires. (Dreams of the end of human kingdoms)
8. Aspects of the vision developed.
9. Exiles and the questions it raises: vision. (God's purpose)
- 10-12. Aspects of this vision developed. (A final revelation)

Daniel 1 | Opportunity in political disaster

Our times

Two lessons from exile

The history of exile

God's plan for then

God's plan for now

For further thought

- Are we well prepared to face living as the Lord's people in an anti-Lord world?
- In what ways do Christians withdraw from the world or go along with it?
- When is confronting the world actually the same as conforming to the world?
- What issues in our world should believers not react to?
- What issues in our world should believers speak up about?
- What issues in our world should believers be prepared to die over?

Daniel 2 | The big picture is too big

The dreams of Kings

- Dreams or oracles?
- Grace or power?
- Co-ruler or god?
- Servant or opponent?

There is a God in heaven who reveals secrets

- Gold
- Silver
- Bronze
- Iron
- Iron and clay

The final Kingdom

For further thought

- What are the marks of competition between the ways of Babylon and the ways of the Lord God in this chapter?
- What is the main point of this chapter (vv11-12, 27-28, 47)?
- How are we to respond to authorities in our world (Jeremiah 27:1-7, Matthew 22:15-22, Romans 13:1-7)?
- How does Daniel respond to authority in this chapter?
- How is the Kingdom of God at work amongst the Kingdoms of this world today?

Daniel 3 | When politics becomes religion

Religion, Power and Race

- Nebuchadnezzar
- The Magi
- Religious land-grab

Disloyalty as the deepest loyalty

- The three Jewish men

Faith without stupidity

- But if not...
- Through the fire, not from it

No other God can save in this way

- Grace is power

For further thought:

- To discover what our society's idols are, make a list of the priorities people live by and the things we covet (see Colossians 3:5).
- Can you think of recent examples where religion is used to express loyalty to the State?
- Why wouldn't the three men worship the idol and then return to worshipping the Lord God when it could have been such a simple thing to do?
- Discuss the type of trust that the three men have in the Lord God. How does it differ from what we have been taught faith in God should be like?
- Why doesn't God save his servants from going into the fire to begin with?

Daniel 4 | Power, pride and psychosis

What matters – God's glory or ours?

Nebuchadnezzar's last words

Pride and madness

Service and sanity

Our pride or our service

For further thought

- Why does it matter what people think of us?
- Is it madness to build God out of his world as Nebuchadnezzar had done?
- Why and how do we do this?
- Why does God first warn Nebuchadnezzar about the judgement he is facing?
- Why do we sometimes respond to judgement but not to kindness?
- How is this judgement of Nebuchadnezzar also a kindness?
- How can we build God out of the responsibilities he has given us?
- How would you convince a sceptic that we are made in God's image and not the other way round?

Daniel 5 | God's political graffiti

For further thought

- What was the significance of what Belshazzar did with the golden vessels from the temple?
- What does Daniel 5 teach us about *values*?
- What were Belshazzar's values and what is God's concept of value? (Compare Luke 12:13-24, I Peter 1:18-19; 2:6-7).
- Why was God's judgement of Belshazzar harsher than that of Nebuchadnezzar?
- Are there lessons for us in this?
- In what way can God's servants today bring prophetic insight and even warnings to those in positions of leadership?

Daniel 6 | When backroom deals backfire

For further thought

- (See notes under the introduction) Is it possible to incorporate the findings of archaeology into a defence of the historical reliability of the Bible?
- Does the invention of laws to which all are subject represent an advance in human civilisation? How can these go wrong?
- If differences in religious convictions cause political tensions in the community - is it better to have one worldwide belief or value that is enforced by the State?
- If we are living for God's kingdom while being good citizens of the State, how should we conduct ourselves when the customs of those around us break God's laws?
- How would you display tolerance when you disagreed with or disapproved of someone's speech or behaviour?
- What lessons about prayer can we learn from Daniel 6?

Daniel 7 | The final conspiracy theory

History, prophecy, and wisdom.

Four beasts and four kingdoms.

Exiles from the Kingdom of Israel.

The Kingdom of God that is to come.

For further thought

- What can we learn from comparing the critique of world empires given in Daniel 7 with that given in Daniel 2?
- What does the imagery of verses 9-10 tell us about the nature of God's judgement?
- How do you understand the title *Son of Man* when applied to the Lord Jesus? (First used in Matthew 8:20 and finally in Matthew 26:64 or John 1:15 and 13:31).
- What relevance in the title *Son of Man* to judgement? (see John 5:27, Revelation 1:12-16).
- How would you convince someone that God's future judgement of the human race is a good thing?

Peter writes in his first letter:

- *"Show proper respect to everyone, love the family of believers, fear God, honour the emperor."* (1 Peter 2:17). What does it mean to fear God and honour the emperor in our context?
- How do we live well as exiles?
- How might the news that God will not always deliver his people out of trouble be an encouragement?

Daniel 8 | Grand, trivial empires

For further thought

Daniel chapter 7 can be seen as a description of real empires that become a projection of four different *types* of empires that will rule on the earth until the Son of Man comes to reclaim history. What distinguishes the *types* of government is their acknowledgement of God and his ways. The four beasts are God's view of different types of government.

Daniel chapter 8 is one instance of how these beasts work out in history. We are told that the ram is Persia-Media (two horns) who for 200 years could do as it pleased. That the male goat is Greece and its horn is now known to us as Alexander the great, who, as he lay dying from disease and alcoholism in Babylon, divided his kingdom amongst his four generals (the four horns). The subtle, corrupt horn who opposes God and his people is then Antiochus IV.

What makes Antiochus Epiphanies so significant in history and in the later writings in the Bible (e.g. Matthew 24) is that he becomes a *type* of the corrupt rulers after him (see 8:9-14). Antiochus took away the daily sacrifice, persecuted and killed those who followed the Lord God.

- What is the significance of these actions?
- What is the relationship of truth to power?
- The Jewish festival of Hanukkah (celebrated around our Christmas time each year) commemorates the victory of the Maccabean revolt over the Seleucid King Antiochus - does the history behind this event affirm the claims of Jesus to be both Messiah and Lord?

Daniel 7 tells us about governments exercise a noble humanity (the winged lion with a face like a man is inspired by the experience of Nebuchadnezzar in Babylon) through to animalistic nations like the Bear (strong) and Leopard (fast) through to the utterly monstrous. The fourth beast is a machine like government. This type of government is inhumane, it sinks below the decency of animals by becoming an intelligently deliberate monster (1 John 2:18).

Daniel 7 tells us these beasts will come and go and even exist at the same time in history but that God will stop each type of beast. Daniel 8 tells us that God judges the historical outworking of each of these types of governments *within* history.

Daniel reminds us that it is God's world and he is dealing with the powers we see around us now according to these visions. Governments are judged according to how they treat the knowledge they have of God - to what degree they adopt or oppose the natural knowledge of God we have or accept, tolerate or persecute the special revelation of God we are given through the Bible.

This is why we are called to support some governments. Because, inspite of their imperfections some humanity remains in them (Jeremiah 29:7). It is also why we are called to oppose other governments, because they reject or oppose the things of God and therefore the things that make us human and not beasts or worse. (e.g. 1 Maccabees 2). As the memorial boards in our churches testify, we have always known that somethings are worth suffering for. Somethings are more precious even than our own lives which is why we need to understand the times we are in well.

Daniel 9 | Prayer's power and final answer

For further thought

- What was useful for you in the talk from Daniel 9? What questions has it raised?
- How can we shape our prayers to pray God's promises to Him?
- How can we seek God in a committed way s Daniel does? (9:3)

- Why did Jeremiah 29:10-14 drive Daniel to prayer?
- What are the lessons to be drawn from Daniel's prayer?
- How does it compare to the apostle Paul's concerns in Romans 9:1-4?
- Why was the restoration of Israel necessary (Ezekiel 39:25-29)?
- How do we use the Bible in our own prayer life in adoration, confession and intercession?
- Before Jesus was crucified he talked to his disciples about the temple and the city of Jerusalem (Luke 21:5-6, 20-24). Does this help us to understand Daniel 9:26? Do Acts 1:6-7, 3:14 and 19-21 carry these ideas forward?

Daniel 10 | The power struggle we don't see

For further thought

- Daniel was fasting as he prayed in earnest for God's people. How might this have helped?
- Compare the vision of the man above the river (vv4-8) with that of Revelation 1:12-17. What is the great war to which Daniel 10:1 refers to? Is it related to our warfare in Ephesians 6:12-18?
- What is the nature of our warfare as God's people today?
- How would you describe the unseen world of good and bad angels to someone who is sceptical of the non-material world?

Daniel 11 | The final enemies

For further thought

- Read the introductory notes on the dating of Daniel above. Using a study Bible note the historical events that each prophecy in this passage alludes to. Where are there ambiguities? Where is there a good match? Why do you think some things are clear and others are obscure in Biblical prophecy?
- What would you say to someone who dismissed the Bible on the basis that people's predictions of the end times have proven wrong in the past?
- There is danger in misreading the signs of the time to think that the end has finally come.
- Why do you think the man of heaven does not want Daniel to think that the reign of Antiochus IV is the final battle of God's people (11:35 onwards cannot be aligned with the history of Antiochus IV)?

Daniel 12 | The peace we are seeking

For further thought

- What encouragement can we draw from the message of Daniel 12?
- What hope does it give to those under pressure for their faith?

I heard but I did not understand (12:8) - coming to terms with the final vision of Daniel.

The wise know there are limits to their wisdom. They know that some things are meant for us in our daily lives while other things are beyond us, kept from us, outside our sphere of responsibility.

The final vision given to Daniel begins in Chapter 10. It is an objective experience, rather than a dream, at the edge of the Tigris river (10:4-7). The content of this vision is what will happen to God's people in the days after Daniel. In the days since the destruction of the Kingdom of Israel and the trickle back return from exile that begun under Darius (10:1).

Chapter 11 leads us through hundreds of years of the history of the empires around Judea. The focus here is on the Seleucid (Northern Kingdom) and Ptolemaic (Southern or Egyptian Kingdoms) that are two of the remnant Kingdoms that came out of the four way division of Alexander the Great's empire. These two warring fractions laid competing claims upon Judea until the Roman empire conquered them. The focus of the vision in chapter 11 falls upon the 'contemptible person' who claims the Royal throne of the Northern Kingdom even though he had no right to it. His story runs from 11:21 to 31. We know him as Antiochus IV, who we first met, at least in any recognisable detail, in chapter 8 (see the notes above).

From 11:33 to 35 we have a note from the man of heaven about the importance of being wise, that is, of being committed to the Lord God, even though the days after Daniel will see times when many of the wise will be killed or stumble in their commitment to God. After this literary break we have a description of a King (King, being the name of a human ruler in this final vision. Prince is the name of a spiritual ruler; thus, 10:20, 11:1 and 12:1) who will arise from the area of the Northern Kingdom (modern Iran/Iraq) and sweep through the beautiful land (Judea) to conquer from the North, through Palestine, the Sinai peninsula and most of Northern and North Eastern Africa. We know that this is was not Antiochus IV because his rule was frustrated by the Romans. Instead, the man of heaven presents him as a ruler who introduces the final days of history that begin in 12:1.

Michael, the (spiritual) prince of God's people, will arise as open warfare is declared upon the people of God and it will be time of distress that has not been known since the beginning of nations in Genesis 11. Jesus, quotes this part of Daniel as he conflates this time of the end with the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple by the Romans (Mark 13, Matthew 24). He describes the terrors of the last days by citing the forthcoming Roman destruction of Jerusalem as foretaste of those final times just as he uses the desolation of the temple by Antiochus IV as a foretaste of the Roman destruction (Mark 13:14). The desolation of the temple by Antiochus is also a template, a shadow, or a foretaste of the final warfare against God's people in Daniel 12 (12:7, 11, 12 - Antiochus ended daily sacrifice between 167 and 164 BC for approximately three and a half years or, time [1 year], times [2 years] and half a time [6 months]).

During this final time of great distress (12:1), the power of God's people will be finally broken (12:7) - in other words, open international warfare will be declared against all the things of God. There will be no civil or religious tolerance for Christianity or Hebrew religion. However, the time of this distress will be limited in the same way the distress in the time of Antiochus and Rome was limited (12:5-7, Matthew 24:21,22).

Is is so easy to get confused by how passages like Daniel 12, Matthew 24 and Mark 13 deliberately interweave images from different periods to refer to future events. But once we understand that Jesus, in the gospels, the man of heaven in Daniel, is looking at theological themes and types of beastly powers throughout history it gets easier to discern that while history does not repeat itself, from God's point of view it often rhymes. We have seen the anti-Christ in Antiochus IV, we see him at certain times in the

Roman empire, especially around the destruction of the temple, we've seen evidence of him in the centuries since and too frequently in the 20th century (1 John 2:18,19).

Of course, though he has cast his terrifying shadows upon history, we still await the final revealing of the man of lawlessness (2 Thessalonians 2) - the mysterious King who rages well beyond the abilities of Antiochus IV in the closing verses of Daniel 11.

At the end we know that the anti-God powers, the subhuman beasts that rule this world (Daniel 7), will be defeated. After the great distress in Daniel 12:1 comes the resurrection and the judging of the living and the dead (12:2,3). Those who have been wise enough to persist in following God and his ways, even through the great distress of the final days, will shine while others will only rise to shame.

Sealed until the end

Daniel seems to understand the final vision (chapters 10 to 12) well enough but, wants to know what the outcome of all this struggle, this spiritual and physical warfare will be. The answer he gets is the application for us of the last two chapters. He is told to go his way because the outcome is sealed until the time of the end. To put that another way, the details, the dates, the personalities, the circumstances are not for us to know. What is for us is that the troubled times of the last days will refine God's people (12:10) who will come from all over - not just from within Israel (12:4), that the time of the final great distress will be limited (12:11) and that the people of God will win as they always have, by grace through their trials and weakness (12:3,4).

As for us, we are to go our way and do the good God has given us to do with the lives, gifts, circumstances, opportunities and challenges he has placed before us. We are to be wise enough to know how to serve where we are and wise enough to recognise the limitations of our knowledge and power. Wise enough to depend upon the grace of God in Jesus Christ.

Somethings belong to God alone. Somethings are sealed. But as for you, woman or man of God... serve the true King in these difficult days and with the wise you will rise to receive your inheritance at the end.

Amen.