

DAVID HELM
DANIEL
FOR YOU



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Daniel For You

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Published by:
The Good Book Company

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New Zealand: www.thegoodbook.co.nz



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(Hardcover) ISBN: 9781910307267

(Paperback) ISBN: 9781910307250

Design by André Parker

Printed in the USA

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SERIES PREFACE

Each volume of the *God's Word For You* series takes you to the heart of a book of the Bible, and applies its truths to your heart.

The central aim of each title is to be:

- Bible centered
- Christ glorifying
- Relevantly applied
- Easily readable

You can use *Daniel For You*:

To read. You can simply read from cover to cover, as a book that explains and explores the themes, encouragements and challenges of this part of Scripture.

To feed. You can work through this book as part of your own personal regular devotions, or use it alongside a sermon or Bible-study series at your church. Each chapter is divided into two shorter sections, with questions for reflection at the end of each.

To lead. You can use this as a resource to help you teach God's word to others, both in small-group and whole-church settings. You'll find tricky verses or concepts explained using ordinary language, and helpful themes and illustrations along with suggested applications.

These books are not commentaries. They assume no understanding of the original Bible languages, nor a high level of biblical knowledge. Verse references are marked in **bold** so that you can refer to them easily. Any words that are used rarely or differently in everyday language outside the church are marked in **gray** when they first appear, and are explained in a glossary towards the back. There, you'll also find details of resources you can use alongside this one, in both personal and church life.

Our prayer is that as you read, you'll be struck not by the contents of this book, but by the book it's helping you open up; and that you'll praise not the author of this book, but the One he is pointing you to.

Carl Laferton, Series Editor

INTRODUCTION TO DANIEL

How can we remain faithful to our God in a world that rejects him? Is it even worth standing firm and obeying him, when his kingdom often seems so very far away? How can we live courageously and confidently in nations that do not seek to live under God's rule? And is it possible to be a blessing to our nations, and show the power and goodness of our God, even in a time such as ours?

Those are pressing questions for those of us who live in contexts where to be a Christian is no longer the norm (if it ever was) and is increasingly to be misunderstood, maligned and even mistreated. And since this is the context in which Daniel found himself, the book that bears his name is a book that will reassure, challenge and thrill us as we read it today.

In the Hebrew Bible, the book of Daniel is placed in a section of books that recount Israel's history. In your Bible, however, you will find it located among the Old Testament prophetic books. This difference does not surprise us as we read through Daniel, because there are two kinds of literature within one single book. Chapters 1 – 6 are historical narrative—they are stories, narrating the historical highlights of an Israelite named Daniel who served in the king's court at the time of the **Babylonian exile**. Chapters 7 – 12, on the other hand, are a series of visions—they are best described as **apocalyptic literature***, because these visions take Daniel to days beyond his own, to the coming of God's kingdom.

With these two distinct types of literature, the broad structure of Daniel is revealed. It is divided evenly into two parts. For the first six chapters, the phrase *At Home in Babylon* works well as a kind of summary title. After all, these chapters taught those early **post-exilic** readers (small Jewish congregations who had no king and who had not had a very good run), and now us, how to be at home in this present world. Through Daniel and his friends, we, as followers of God in Christ, begin to learn what we can rightly expect out of this life. And as we will come to see, it's not all bad.

* Words in **gray** are defined in the Glossary (page 215).

With the apocalyptic visions of chapters 7 – 12, though, we find a clear change in tone and emphasis. Those early Jewish readers would have learned that their ultimate longings to be delivered, to have their exilic condition ultimately removed, would come with great cost. Things would not be easy. For even after seventy years of exile, Daniel learned that seventy sets of seven remained for God to accomplish his kingdom work. Salvation required more than a simple trip back across the wilderness to Jerusalem. It was not even really a matter of geography. Rather, the visions showed that the kingdom God promised comes only after considerable time and difficulty for God's people and **God's anointed**. In fact, Daniel began to realize that the end of their 70 years in Babylon was only a **precursor** to the years needed for their final deliverance and salvation. As such, *Getting Home from Babylon* is a phrase that captures the second half of the book. It describes something of the required and prolonged season of suffering while God's people come to terms with life after the exile. While God's promises of a king and kingdom were clear and known, the hour of their complete fulfillment remained opaque, like a figure in the distant shadows.

Two Helps in Reading Daniel

Daniel is not always an easy book to read! That said, a right understanding of how two biblical **theological** terms function in Daniel—namely, Babylon and exile—should provide us some help. Many of us, very likely, have been conditioned to understand those words in entirely negative terms. To be in exile and carried off to Babylon means that you are under God's judgment. This is certainly the perspective in 2 Kings or Lamentations. But the book of Daniel is uncommon in that it cuts against this common perspective.

Babylon

To be sure, when Babylon is mentioned in the Bible, our first thoughts are generally negative. We might recall the ungodly aspirations of the

people who built the tower of Babel in the first book of the Bible (Genesis 11:1-9); or we might think of Babylon in the last book of the Bible, where it becomes the prophet's preferred term for speaking of God's judgment. For example, we see in Revelation an angel commanding:

"Fear God and give him glory, because the hour of his judgment has come, and worship him who made heaven and earth, the sea and the springs of water.' Another angel, a second, followed, saying, 'Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great, she who made all nations drink the wine of the passion of her sexual immorality.'" (Revelation 14:7-8)

The idea that Babylon is a negative biblical theme can be traced from the voice of the psalmist in Psalm 137:1, and 8-9:

"By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and wept, when we remembered Zion ... O daughter of Babylon, doomed to be destroyed, blessed shall he be who repays you with what you have done to us! Blessed shall he be who takes your little ones and dashes them against the rock!"

Despite these verses, is there another way to understand Babylon that would better inform our reading of Daniel? For that we need the words of the prophet **Jeremiah**: words sent as a letter to the exiles in Babylon. Jeremiah 29:1-7 shows that the negative perspective on Babylon, while not wrong, is incomplete. The prophetic message against Babylon in Jeremiah 51 has, in my opinion, led many biblical **theologians** to miss the uniqueness of God's plans for Babylon during the 70-year period of Daniel's exile, and therefore to misread the book. This is a case of one's theological framework being placed on top of the biblical text, rather than allowing particular biblical texts to control one's framework.

The message against Babylon doesn't tell the whole story. Rather, Jeremiah argues that, for the 70-year period that Daniel lived in Babylon, God intended good things for this city. Jeremiah 29:1 and 5-7 tell us:

"These are the words of the letter that Jeremiah the prophet sent from Jerusalem to the surviving elders of the exiles, and to the

priests, the prophets, and all the people, whom **Nebuchadnezzar** had taken away into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon ... 'Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.'"

The last line is especially pertinent. God wants prayers made on behalf of Babylon, because he intends to bless it while God's people are at home there. And by blessing Babylon, God intends to provide for the welfare of his own people. For this reason, I have found the prophecies of Jeremiah to be the single most helpful aid in reorienting my perspective on the book of Daniel.

The internal evidence of Daniel also supports a similar, more positively framed conclusion. The book lacks the typically negative language we might expect to hear when God's plans for Babylon are

declared. Instead, as will be argued in the chapters that follow, we are right to notice that God intends good things for Babylon during the time of Daniel. That good allows us to view the exiles as being at home there. The internal evidence also shows Daniel's heart for the king being aligned with God's own heart—one of compassion. Further, the early dreams of Nebuchadnezzar (see

God intends to
bless Babylon
while his
people are at
home there.

Daniel chapters 2 and 3), when read with Jeremiah in mind, demonstrate that God has a message for the world as well as a desire to bring salvation to some who dwell there. Indeed, Psalm 137 is not the only psalm that mentions Babylon—and the book of Daniel should bring Psalm 87:4 into play as well: "Among those who know me I

mention Rahab and Babylon; behold Philistia and Tyre, with Cush—‘This one was born there,’ they say.”

What we have in Daniel, then, is a prophetic book that challenges conventional views of prophetic literature. Knowing this at the outset will help in reading the book. For while other prophets viewed Babylon solely in negative terms, Daniel did not. Instead, like the book of Jonah (which shows God’s love for the **Assyrians**), Daniel demonstrates another side of God. This book shows that God intends to do more than merely judge an ungodly nation. Instead, he offers a saving word to those under his wrath—his deserved, settled anger. And for that, he will need his people dwelling there. They will need to be at home in Babylon, revealing God’s king and kingdom in ways that ultimately find their fulfillment in Christ.

Exile

As with Babylon, the theme of exile will help us read Daniel aright. The conventional wisdom that makes us think of Babylon in negative terms also holds for exile. Since the forcible removal of Adam and Eve from the garden (see Genesis chapter 3), exiles are those people who have been driven out by God. An exile is one who is experiencing God’s just banishment for sin. And this is, of course, generally true—but, as we will see, it is also inaccurate when applied to the book of Daniel.

You will be helped in reading Daniel to remember that God gave Jeremiah a special vision about the exiles in Babylon. The aim of the vision from God was to convince us to think differently about the exile. In Jeremiah 24, the prophet sees two baskets, one filled with good figs and the other with bad figs. The good figs were very good and the bad figs were very bad. And then, the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah with this interpretation in Jeremiah 24:5b-6a:

“Like these good figs, so I will regard as good the exiles from Judah, whom I have sent away from this place to the land of the Chaldeans. I will set my eyes on them for good, and I will bring

them back to this land. I will build them up, and not tear them down.”

The interpretation went further. Not only would it reverse Israel’s negative view of exile at the time of Daniel, but it showed that God’s wrath would rest on those Israelites who were not to be hauled off to Babylon! Consider Jeremiah 24:8-9:

“But thus says the LORD: Like the bad figs that are so bad they cannot be eaten, so will I treat Zedekiah the king of Judah, his officials, the remnant of Jerusalem who remain in this land, and those who dwell in the land of Egypt. I will make them a horror to all the kingdoms of the earth, to be a reproach, a byword, a taunt, and a curse in all the places where I shall drive them.”

If Daniel is to be read well, how we understand Babylon and exile must be reinterpreted along the lines that Jeremiah’s prophesy requires. In the book of Daniel, then, it is the exiles in Babylon who are truly counted to be God’s blessed people. And to be asked to live in Babylon, as Daniel was, was to find oneself at the center of God’s positive mission to the world.

The Emphasis of Daniel

If the book of Daniel were a piece of sheet music, it would be impossible to read it without hearing the themes of kings and kingdoms prominently placed along the **melodic line**. These important notes appear in every chapter and, together, they form a tune that is pulled through the book from beginning to end. More particularly, the emphasis of the book will reveal God’s design in establishing his own everlasting King and kingdom in the world.

The value of seeing this theme is not merely to see that God is *sovereign* over all things (which of course he is), but it includes seeing God install his King and kingdom in the world for *salvation*. This aspect of Daniel—that God’s King is Savior, and that God’s kingdom brings salvation—has been often overlooked by readers. In fact, most

commentaries skip over this. Instead, they tend to focus exclusively on God's sovereignty alone, which for them is limited to judgment. As a result, the connections between Daniel and the first coming of Christ, complete with his death and resurrection, receives little to no attention by most.

The working premise of this book on Daniel will be different. In the following chapters, the King and kingdom prophesied about in Daniel will find their primary interpretation in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The words of Jesus on the road to Emmaus provide a more balanced guide to approaching the Old Testament in Luke 24:25-27:

“And he said to them, ‘O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?’ And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself.”

In fact, it will be argued that even the apocalyptic visions of Daniel 7 – 12 are meant to reveal the sufferings of Israel as a necessary preparation for the suffering Servant, the Anointed, the Christ, who alone brings salvation to his people through his death and resurrection.

With these few thoughts in mind, we are ready to begin.

1. KINGS AND KINGDOMS

The book of Daniel opens with a crisis. Nebuchadnezzar, the ruler of the powerful empire centered on Babylon, or “Shinar” (**v 2***), had besieged Jerusalem, the capital of Judah, the land God had promised his people and protected them in (**v 1**)¹. This time, there had been no rescue. “The Lord gave Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand” (**v 2**); the city and the nation fell. Further, “some of the vessels of the house of God”—the Jerusalem Temple—also come into Nebuchadnezzar’s possession. The dynastic and religious centers of Judah are eradicated. It gets still worse: as we will see in the next few verses, this severity of displacement extends not only to the gold and the glitter added to Babylon’s religious coffers, but it includes the best and the brightest young people in Judah.

Things could not possibly be worse. Judah’s king and kingdom have been conquered. And with it, the era when Jerusalem functioned as a geo-political force had ended. Her ablest people, both for her work and worship, have been hauled off into exile. For the people of God, these horrific events would seem to signal that all the **covenantal promises** of God, centuries old in the making, were now evaporating like the morning mist into thin air. In fact, Israel’s long slow march toward their demise had been in play for some time. For decades now, with only a few exceptional periods of time, Judah had been in decline (2 Kings 23:31 – 24:9). But now, the end has come with irretrievable force.

* All Daniel verse references being looked at in each chapter are in **bold**.

Two things stand out: the defeat of Judah's king and the deportation of some of her people. And if these two things are not overcome, it marks the end, not only of a king over Judah and the continuance of God's people, but also of the comfort in knowing that God's promises to save his people, and through them, all the families of the earth, remained intact (Genesis 12:1-3; 2 Samuel 7:12). So the fate of Daniel, his friends and the rest of the exiles is not just of historical interest; the future of the world depends upon it, because God's promises are wrapped up with them.

A Book for All Times

It's not hard to imagine what Daniel and his friends were feeling on their long walk to Babylon. I am reminded of the journey Vince Lombardi made with his family upon leaving the New York Giants (an American football team) to take the head-coaching job with the Packers. His biographer recounts the trip:


"Marie could not suppress the tears when her husband steered their two-tone Chevy toward the turnpike to begin their long trek to Wisconsin—Was this the beginning or the end?—Her twelve year old daughter sobbed behind her ... As they approached Milwaukee, the scenery changed dramatically to white on white and Vincent and Susan looked out in disbelief and despair ... 'When we drove around Chicago everything was fine and we were up and talking and then it got real silent in the car when we saw this snow ... We were going into a depression here. I'm thinking, Where's he taking me? I don't think I want to do this.'" (David Maraniss, *When Pride Still Mattered: A Life of Vince Lombardi*, pages 204-205)

This is how it must have felt to be one of those making the long trek toward Babylon. The same could be said for the book's earliest readers as well, for, in its final form, the book of Daniel emerged first in post-exilic Jewish congregations trying to make their way in the world—a world vastly altered from the idealized reign of **David**

and his ancient kingdom. These readers lived in a time when circumstances were not very much to their liking. The earliest readers would have been Jews living sometime between 525BC and 170BC, depending on your view of the historical evidence. Both ends of the timeline share two things in common: Israel was without a king, at least one of any consequence; and without a kingdom that could rightly be called their own. The early readers of Daniel suffered the loss of **political autonomy**. In fact, they were subject to a life of subservience under other powerful nations. They were familiar with being marginalized. Though they were still religious, their modes of worship were increasingly relegated to those negotiated freedoms that could only be granted by those in power.

For them, the book of Daniel was a salve, an ointment for an open wound, and the best bedtime reading available on the market; for there is nothing like a good old-fashioned retelling of the events that happened to the boys in Babylon to put steel in your backbone and reconcile you to being at home under occupied rule. In reading and rereading Daniel, these families, and especially the children, would learn to call anyplace home, really. In doing so, they would gain the confidence and commitment so desperately needed to remain faithful and useful to God in an ungodly world.

Here is the book that invited them, and now invites you, to look back on the fidelity and wisdom of Daniel for the purpose of gaining strength for today. Christians all over the world today, even increasingly so in the West, share the early readers' lot in life. Our King and his kingdom so often feel so far away. Jesus and his reign appear as things of the ancient past, or else, things yet to be, but not here with you or with me. In addition, our rulers, like theirs, possess the malleable traits of soaking wood, and are bent more and more on dictating the terms for our worship.



Our King and his kingdom so often feel so far away.

What Daniel has to offer us is the same thing those first readers must have gleaned: a knowledge that God is still at work, and a confidence that as with those who came before us, it is possible to remain faithful to Christ in our own day and fruitful in our life work.

Hope in Crisis

What are we to make of this account of the fall of Israel's king and kingdom? Hidden in the text is the simple line: "And the Lord gave..."

God is the one
moving the
wheel of history
to accomplish
his eternal ends.

That subtle phrase, quietly anchoring Daniel **1:2**, provides the point of emphasis that the writer wants to make to his readers. He wants them to know that, when catastrophe struck Judah's king and kingdom, it was God, and not Nebuchadnezzar, who was ultimately the one moving the wheel of history to accomplish his eternal ends.

- *And the Lord gave*—a sentiment of comfort to bolster readers who find themselves waiting for the arrival of God's promises.
- *And the Lord gave*—a balm in the midst of disquieting surroundings.
- *And the Lord gave*—when everything seemed lost, and when life seemed not worth living, God was yet working his purposes out.

And he does so even on matters as big as events unfolding on the world stage! He removes kings and sets up kings. And that is true even in our day. May this be a word of comfort to us!

The **Westminster Confession of Faith** articulates the doctrine of God's providence in precisely this comforting way:

"God the great Creator of all things doth uphold, direct, dispose, and govern all creatures, actions, and things, from the greatest even to the least, by his most wise and holy providence, accord-

ing to his **infallible** foreknowledge, and the free and **immutable** counsel of his own will, to the praise of the glory of his wisdom, power, justice, goodness, and mercy.”

Later, the prophet Isaiah looked beyond Judah’s days in Babylon, when she was being disciplined for her wayward ways. And he did so with hopeful words of promises that remain secure (Isaiah 40:1-2):

“Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the LORD’s hand double for all her sins.”

In time, Jesus himself would represent Israel as the one the Lord God gave over to earthly powers, as the one to whom God gave favor among men, and as the one most able to be useful in and to the world. Ultimately he will bring a final end to our sin, on a day when the King and kingdom are finally realized. He announced his kingship and comfort to us by saying: “Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted” (Matthew 5:4). The Gospel of John makes the reversal of fortunes complete with: “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16).

These four words would have comforted their first hearers, and they can and should bring comfort to us today, too: “And the LORD gave...”

Meet the Characters

While we take comfort in knowing that the Lord is behind the big things in life, it is essential also to know that his care extends to smaller matters as well—even to the circumstances faced by individual people. In the first paragraph, we meet the leading characters of the first half of the book: Daniel and his three friends—youths who, as we will see, were guided by the loving hand of God, and whose names and stories have been recorded in the word of God.

These four were part of the deportation. They were of noble background, possibly even royalty (Daniel **1:3**): “youths without blemish, of good appearance and skillful in all wisdom, endowed with knowledge, understanding learning, and competent to stand in the king’s palace” (v **4**). Evidently, those carted off to Babylon were selected for their learning as well as their looks. We get the sense that their deportation was meant to siphon off the intellectual capital of a recently occupied state. Babylon took only those who had the ability of furthering the interests and extent of a society—the Babylonian society. They intended to fully **assimilate** these men into their own ways and wisdom (v **5**). They were stripped of their Jewish names, and given new Babylonian ones (v **6-7**). They were enrolled in a pagan academy—the University of Babylon—and given a world-class secular education. How will they fare in Babylon? And what will become of them, so far from Jerusalem? Will there be a future for God’s people, as God’s people? Is there any hope now that God’s promises will be fulfilled?

There is a Future

If we look ahead to the very last verse of the chapter, we find a provisional answer (v 21): “And Daniel was there until the first year of King Cyrus.” Clearly, Daniel became a fixture in the court of Nebuchadnezzar and, several rulers later, of Cyrus. The longevity of Daniel’s stay demonstrates that a lifetime of usefulness to God and the world is possible. He was, for the moment, at home in Babylon—an idea that will carry us through to the end of the stories in Daniel 1 – 6 and to a similar summary statement in 6:28.

Daniel’s story begins by inviting us to look down into the well of times past, to this seventy-year period between “the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah” and “the first year of King Cyrus” (v 21). It invites us to learn from God’s people then, and to learn about the God whom they worshiped, and we are called to worship. The series of court tales that will take us from here to Daniel 6 will be

exciting, troubling and challenging; and crucially, they will all be acted out under the providential hand of God. God is at work and in control, and he has good work for his people to do.

Questions for reflection

1. In which situations do you find it hardest—or even feel it is impossible—to remain faithful to Christ?
2. How does reflecting on Daniel’s position at the start of this book encourage you to see it as a word for you, in those situations?
3. How does the knowledge that the Lord’s hand is behind all events comfort you today, both in your own life and when you consider current world events?

Endnote

¹ Early Greek translations of the Old Testament include a prologue before Daniel 1:1 that is included in the Apocrypha as “Susana.” It recounts a supposed episode from early in Daniel’s life. It is included in early Latin translations of the Bible and Daniel 13. It does not appear in Hebrew or Aramaic manuscripts of Daniel.