

## **Conversations with Scripture: The Book of Daniel**

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### **Study Questions**

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The book of Daniel is full of stories, perhaps first learned in childhood, as well as apocalyptic dreams and visions of the end times. It is a collection of tales from a time long ago, when stories were told to share deeper meaning of a reality that was too dangerous to openly talk about. These stories of danger and rescue, beasts and heavenly warriors can be read as myth, history, wisdom, or as many have stated throughout the years, as predictors of the destruction of the world. Can the stories of Daniel speak to us today?

### **Introduction**

This study guide is meant to accompany each chapter as a means to go deeper and reflect upon the events, personalities and ideas that the author unpacks through the chapters of the book of Daniel. The questions and reflections will invite you into a conversation about how the practice of one's faith can continue while in exile, recognizing the parallels between Daniel's situation and the challenges faced by Christians all around the world today. How we can practice our faith in a world that is increasingly secular, suspicious, and hostile to those who speak publicly about one's beliefs?

The entire book claims to take place in the sixth century BCE, culminating in "the third year of King Cyrus of Persia," 535 BCE. The structure of the book of Daniel is straightforward. It begins with six "court" tales from the Babylonian exile, written from a very Jewish point of view using a legendary hero who was taken captive in the exile as a young boy and brought up in the court of the Babylonian king. The second portion involves four visions in which Daniel learns about coming occurrences either in a dream or through an angel. These are also set during the Babylonian and early Persian years. The book ends with three additional stories showing Daniel's wisdom and faith with visions of the last times and final instructions. The book of Daniel is one of the later books of the Old Testament and has played an important part in later interpretation of the Bible, especially in Christian circles. It has many connections to the wisdom tradition, religious piety for the post-exilic period, some of the earliest teachings about a divine promise of life after death, a coming kingdom of God, and apocalyptic prophecy.

As you begin this study of the book of Daniel, consider the following:

- Why are you engaging in this study of the book of Daniel?
- What have your previous understandings and opinions of prophets, angels, visions, and apocalyptic literature been? Do you go into this study with any preconceived notions? If so, jot them down before reading.
- What do you hope to learn and discern for yourself in this study?
- What are the Babylonian and Persian empires like at this period of our world's history? How is it different to today's world? Similar?

Before each chapter section of this study guide, portions of scripture will be suggested to read ahead of time. If possible, use a Bible that contains the Apocrypha, as well as the 1979 Book of Common Prayer for reference. You may also wish to have a map of the Persian Empire during the Babylonian captivity and Persian Empire. These can be found in the appendix of most study Bibles.

## **Chapter One: The Kingdom, the Power, and the Glory**

This first chapter sets the scene for Daniel and how these writings became part of our canon of scripture. Questions are immediately posed as to the purpose of these stories as well as their meaning to us today:

- Can we read the book of Daniel in a way that is faithful to the historical context yet still be applicable and relevant for our own time and place?
- How do we balance our obligations to God with our responsibilities as citizens?
- Whom do the kingdom, the power, and the glory belong to?
- Are the kingdoms of this world and God's realm separate but equal realities, and is it possible to serve both God and "king"?
- Out of all the generations who have lived and died since the book was written, do we alone matter to God? Who matters to God?

*Read Genesis 6:9, Job 42:7–9, Daniel 1:1–21, and Ezekiel 14:12–23*

- Ezekiel (14:14) refers to Daniel, Job, and Noah as being models of righteousness. What do these three "characters" have in common that Ezekiel would refer to them in such a way? What is righteousness?

*Read "The Prayer of Azariah and The Song of Three Young Men" (also called The Song of the Three Jews), "Susanna," and "Bel and the Dragon." Each can be found in the Apocrypha.*

Desueza and Jones review the types of writing that composes the book of Daniel as well as the characteristics of the individuals portrayed in the stories. Comparisons are also made with many other figures in the Hebrew Scriptures.

- Wisdom literature addresses the question, "What does it mean to live a wise life?" How is Daniel characteristic of wisdom literature? How not? What does having wisdom mean to you? What does it mean to be wise when the king's will and God's will stand in conflict with each other?
- What do you imagine when you hear the word "apocalyptic"? What is your understanding of revelation? In what ways are the two similar and/or different?
- What events of our own time are similar to the events described of Daniel's dealings with the Babylonian and Persian kings?

Daniel was written during different periods of exile, destruction, and changes of the Jewish people. After a period of time, it became more and more difficult to maintain one's personal, cultural, and religious practices as the people became assimilated into the Babylonian, then Persian, then Greek world. For a culture to survive, its people must

retain their identity, despite the challenges faced in day-to-day life visible all around them. Public sacrifices, the worship of many gods, and the practice of circumcision in a culture that promoted public exercise of mind and (naked) body, are just a few of the societal “norms” faced by the Jews living in exile or back home in Jerusalem. Conquerors define the terms and conditions by which the conquered live.

- What practices today are in conflict with our religious beliefs?
- Where have we seen religious persecution in recent times?
- Where do we see persecution occurring today, locally and globally?
- What are the signs of our times that are similar to what the Jews faced during their exile and return?
- How can we, as a people of God, remain faithful while living in a world dominated by rulers and systems that oppose what we believe God calls us to be?
- If we were to write a supplement to Daniel to describe the world today, what might it read like?

The authors and their interpretation of Daniel see the book as “speaking not only to those who are confronting violent political oppression, but also to those who face the more subtle pressure to placate the rich and the powerful in order to get ahead in the world. The heroes in Daniel model both nonviolent resistance to evil and faithfulness. . . .” Like Daniel’s original audience living under economic and political forces that transformed the culture, we too face similar situations. It is a question of faith and what it means to be fully human. How can we take this study of Daniel to be instructive in our own modern culture of exploitation, commercial interests, and the needs of the world today for a just society?

## **Chapter Two: Which Lord?**

Stories form an important role in shaping faith, forming character, and enabling us to see the connection between our lives and God’s purpose for the world. Stories capture our imagination and help us visualize the abstract concepts of our world and articulate our faith in real life terms.

- What stories have influenced your faith and life?
- What is the source of your life and hope?
- What stories have been passed down to you from your family, generation to generation? Have they helped give your life meaning? If so, how?
- What stories of your faith community have formed your congregation? How have the challenges, experiences, and celebrations made the congregation what it is today?
- Which do you value more—safety, a comfortable life, success, or God? Which would be the easiest to give up and why? Which would be the most difficult?
- What does a faithful life look like?
- What kinds of temptations do you face today? How do you overcome such temptations? What leads you to succumb to temptations?
- How has God been involved in your life?

*Read Daniel 1:1–7 and Genesis 11:1–9*

- If history is a story told by the winners, how do the losers keep their identity and their religious faith from being distorted or lost altogether?
- Why are names important?
- How important is it to retain one's language of origin?
- Have you ever named anything, such as a child or pet? Why did you choose the name?

*Read Daniel 1:8–21*

- When have we seen similar fasts in our time to draw notice to a perceived injustice?
- What other ways do the oppressed act in order to retain their practices and beliefs when persecuted?
- “Prophetic texts associate the gluttony of the rich not simply with insensitivity, but also with the oppressive use of power.” Where else have we read this in scripture? Does this continue in the world today?
- Who gives us a vision for today? Who are the prophets of our time?
- Did you receive any cultural experiences from a previous generation? What would you hope to pass on to future generations?
- How do minority populations in your home community maintain their distinctiveness? How do they avoid becoming assimilated?
- How do social groups maintain their identity and avoid becoming irrelevant?

“The book of Daniel portrays God as the one to whom humans owe not only the vision of a better world, but the power to realize that vision” (p. 18). Desueza and Jones challenge us to live a life dedicated to making a difference in the world.

- Read Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech (<http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkihadream.htm>). How is this related to Daniel and his commitment to God?
- When has someone given you an opportunity to model or mentor them?
- How were scribes sources of power? Who has a comparable role in society today?
- Do you ever face the same type of ethical dilemmas faced by Daniel and his friends, as well as the scribes who wrote about such matters?
- Is it possible to obey two masters?

### **Chapter Three: The Dream of Nebuchadnezzar**

Nebuchadnezzar’s impossible demand prepares us (the reader) for Daniel’s role as a supremely competent interpreter in the coming chapters of the book of Daniel. Dream and omen interpretation were widely practiced in Babylon, and are reminiscent of the stories from Genesis where Joseph was the interpreter of Pharaoh’s dreams. Images and identity are often interconnected, even in our world today, whether in dreams or in the messages overtly around us in the public sector.

*Read Daniel 2:1–49 and Genesis 40:1–41:57*

- When have you had terrifying dreams? Has anything in your life triggered them? Do you go for comfort or explanation afterward? If so, where or to whom?
- Who are the tyrants of the world today? Where do we see those in power terrify their co-workers, subjects, or fellow citizens?
- What happens when tyrants are confronted with the truth and their limits?
- What do the dreams of Nebuchadnezzar and Pharaoh have in common? What do Daniel and Joseph have in common?
- How are Daniel and Joseph able to interpret dreams? How are we able to interpret our own dreams (or those of others)?

*Read Daniel 3:1–30*

- How do images shape human conceptions (and misconceptions) of God?
- Where is the line between cultivating self-images and worshipping idols?
- What images in our culture do you most identify with? Are there particular images in the media, commercials or advertisements that you are especially vulnerable to? If so, which ones and why?
- How could you submit yourself utterly to the will of God? What would you have to give up? What would you have to change about yourself or your lifestyle?

The stories in Daniel promise that God is faithful to God’s people. Even in difficult circumstances of exile, in a pagan place far from the Promised Land, God’s people can have hope. It is Yahweh who gives Daniel “favor and compassion” (Daniel 1:9). The story of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the fiery furnace demonstrates the power of God to defend those who are faithful to God, but there are other issues as well. God will be vindicated—because God is faithful—the story tells us. In the meantime, as we wait for vindication, we must act always in good faith.

- Why are gold, silver, bronze, and iron seen as a contrast to God?
- How does the God of heaven destroy delusions and reshape human lives?
- Are you ever carried away by a sense of your own importance? What causes this and what makes you aware of your behavior?
- What symbols of religion, politics, and power can be found in the world today?
- In what ways does our way of life in the United States depend on obedient “courtiers” and a submissive populace?
- How do you behave when your power (or sense of self) is threatened?
- What is steadfastness? Have you ever exhibited such steadfastness as shown by the three men who refused to bow to Nebuchadnezzar’s image?
- Where is the line between prudence and faithlessness in serving God and others?
- What convictions do you have that are worth dying for, if any?
- Can the presence of God be enough when one is facing suffering or death? If so, how?
- “We seek to control others and bend them to our will, and allow ourselves to be tempted by rewards and intimidated by threats.” Do you agree or disagree? What examples can you give?

## Chapter Four: The Writing on the Wall

Again, the stories in Daniel point to God’s sovereignty. God is king over every earthly king, lord over every earthly lord. While Daniel is the main character, he is not the primary focus—God is. Dreams, visions, and supernatural occurrences show us the tension between wealth, power, and injustice. Desueza and Jones state, “When people begin to imagine defying the king, they are already halfway to taking action. The first step to freedom is believing that the tyrant is not almighty and that God alone is sovereign, a claim with serious implications.”

### *Read Psalm 72*

- What is the role of a king, ruler, or leader of a nation? For what purpose do they exist?
- Explore recent world events in which local citizens have sought to overthrow tyrants, such as in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya. Have any of these been grounded in religious fervor? Where is God in these events?
- When have we seen leaders fail? What leads to their downfall? What are the outcomes for the leader and the people?

### *Read the verses to Hymn 618 in The Hymnal 1982 (“Ye watchers and ye holy ones”)*

- What is a “holy watcher”?
- What do you believe (or not) about angels?
- The authors refer to Jubilees 4:15–16 (<http://www.sacred-texts.com/bib/jub/>) and 1 Enoch 15:3–12 (<http://www.sacred-texts.com/bib/bep/bep02.htm>). How are “watchers” described here?
- Do angels or “watchers” appear today? In what forms?

### *Read Daniel 4:1—6:28*

- When do we view things differently than they really are or how others view them? Give examples. Why do such interpretations differ?
- The authors discuss the imagery and importance of trees in Sumerian and Assyrian literature. Why is this? What do you associate with trees?
- What does it mean to be human? What does it mean to have reason?
- Are there any injustices that occur in our society or world today? What is our responsibility as a Christian in these instances? Do you ever take a stand? If so, what have the consequences been? If not, why not?
- What “objects” do Christians consider holy, and why? Do we lift them up as idols? How do we act when they are desecrated? How do they allow us to approach the divine presence?
- What does the phrase “the handwriting on the wall,” mean to you when you hear it in everyday conversation?
- When does religious conviction collide with the good order of society?
- How does your faith make you vulnerable in society? How so? What do you do to defend yourself?
- Is there any part of your faith you’d be willing to give up?

- What is embodied prayer?
- Do you experience daily prayer? If so, why? What does it give you?

The first six chapters of Daniel represent the kind of piety that would have been considered exemplary by the book's audience. These were observant Jews who were faced to participate in syncretizing practices of the upper classes of their people during the Hellenistic reign of Antiochus IV Epiphanes whom can be read about in 1 Maccabees 1:41–43. For these readers, “the retributive justice of the punishment inflicted on Daniel’s accusers is obvious.”

- What is “retributive justice”? Do we see this occurring in the world today?
- How can accusations eat away at a person or a person’s character?
- Where in modern times have we seen the innocent suffer because of decisions in which they had no part?
- Name some minorities throughout history and today whose distinctive cultural and religious practices make them vulnerable to false charges of sedition and treason?
- Do we have any civil laws that conflict with God’s law?
- What are the values that shape our culture today? Are they similar or different than in Daniel’s time?
- Have you ever been cost a promotion, position, or job because of your values and choices by which you live?
- How do you discern the boundary between religion and culture? Is there a boundary? Should there be?
- One of our Baptismal Promises is to “strive for justice and peace among all people, respecting the dignity of every human being” (BCP, 305). Are we obligated to speak prophetically, calling attention to injustice no matter where it occurred or who committed it? What is the cost for doing so? What is the cost for being silent?

## Chapter Five: The Night Visions

The visions in the next chapters of Daniel point to the establishment of the kingdom of God. Scholars generally agree that these chapters were written in the mid–second century BCE to support the Maccabean revolt against Seleucid Syria. Behind the success of the Maccabean revolution (164 BCE) stood the influence of a group called the *chasidim*. The name means “pious ones,” or the “godly ones.” They were Jews who held fast to the old ways of Judaism. Among the *chasidim* were apocalyptic writers. In Daniel, they use symbols to refer to the foreign powers whose rise and fall mark the different ages of world history.

*Read Daniel 7:1—8:27*

In Daniel chapters 7 to 12, we read of visions of the future. This is where Daniel begins to take the form of apocalyptic writing, pointing to the end times. Its focus is not on predicting the future, but giving some meaning to present happenings. By explaining past events that led up to a terrible situation, it shows that all along God has permitted everything that takes place and is planning to act soon to rescue God’s people.

- Describe the various theories of dreams that you have heard about. Which theory best fits the position taken by Daniel? What position do you hold?
- Apocalyptic literature is grist for various interpretations of the Christian message. Consider what you might make of this kind of literature. What might it mean to those who are living in a situation that does not support one's faith or limits one's freedom? Has anything like this ever happened to you? If not, what would you do if it did?
- How does apocalyptic literature help you understand the end of things?
- What is time?
- Some would say we are living in the end times? What are the signs that give this indication? What do you believe?

What are some of the symbolic meanings of these in the visions? Are these images reminiscent of any other stories in scripture? Look up those passages (such as in Genesis, Ezekiel, Isaiah, and Revelation) and compare and contrast.

- Four winds
- Four beasts (lion, bear, leopard, fourth beast)
- Sea
- Horns
- Thrones
- Fiery flames
- Wheels
- Numbers

Desueza and Jones state, "The entire book of Daniel emphasizes that human power and human beings are temporal and limited." At the conclusion of this book's chapter 5, they say, "The visions in Daniel 7 and 8 teach us that both human beings and God have a role to play in human history." We also get a glimpse of a developing angelology in Jewish tradition.

- What does it mean to be fully human?
- How are we without power, "helpless before political and economic forces over which we have no control"? How can we achieve power? Do we need to?
- Gabriel means "warrior of God." Where does the angel Gabriel appear in the New Testament? What would Gabriel's message be to us today?
- The Feast Day of St. Michael and All Angels is September 29. Read the lections for this day (<http://satucket.com/lectionary/Michael.htm>).

*Read Psalm 102 and Hymn 363 and Hymn 423 (The Hymnal 1982)*

God is described as the "ancient of days," the one who has ruled the earth from its foundations. The vision of the judgment scene (Daniel 7:9) determines the destiny of peoples and the "son of man" comes "with the clouds of heaven." This becomes a pattern for many later apocalyptic works.

- How would you explain the "Ancient One"? The Holy One? Are they the same?
- What makes one holy?
- How is God described in Daniel as well as in the above texts?



- How can you describe God and God’s dwelling place? What would your vision of such a place be?

## Chapter Six: The End of Time

The concluding chapters of Daniel share other visions in which the history of the world empires is described in symbolic terms. Daniel comes to see that the “many days” are not too far away, for according to the divine timetable, the Kingdom of God is at hand.

*Read Daniel 9, Jeremiah 25:11–12, 29:10, and Nehemiah 9*

- In the Hebrew, Daniel turns his face toward God to seek obeying the spirit of Jeremiah’s prophecy. What is prayer to Daniel?
- Read the “Prayer of Confession” in the Book of Common Prayer (BCP, 360). How is Daniel’s prayer similar? How are these similar to Ezra’s prayer from Nehemiah?
- What do you believe prayer is?
- What is corporate sin? Are there any specific realities that we must face in regard to destruction or life-denying actions of others?
- What does it mean to ask for forgiveness for things “left undone”?
- Write a prayer of intercession that Daniel might say in today’s world.
- What in our world today would some say our behavior makes us responsible?
- Read the “Prayer of Humble Access” (BCP, 337). What prayer of supplication might Daniel say to today’s world?
- Do you believe God forgives? If so, why does God forgive?

Bernard Anderson writes in *Understanding the Old Testament, 4<sup>th</sup> edition* (Prentiss Hall, 1998, 571), “The confidence that history moves inevitably and by prearranged plan toward the Kingdom of God fired the zeal of a small band of Jews, enabling them to act and hope when everything seemed against them.” Daniel offered hope to those in exile.

- What is it like to live in exile? Where does exile occur metaphorically and actually today?
- What is your understanding of the concept of Jubilee? Where could we see this enacted in the world today?
- What are the “spoils of war” in our own modern day?
- How can our churches serve as vehicles for forgiveness?
- Who does land belong to? What is meant by public and private land?

*Read Daniel 10:1—11:45, Isaiah 6:1–13 and Ezekiel 9:2–7*

- How is Daniel like the prophets Isaiah and Ezekiel?
- What is the prototype of a faithful servant of God?
- Read the prayers said at Confirmation (BCP, 418). How are they similar to the calling and strengthening of Daniel and other prophets?
- Have you ever felt abandoned by God? How could reading Daniel provide strength and comfort?
- What does it mean to be wise?

- How do we (or those in power) take advantage of existing realities?
- How do you contemplate and confess the sovereignty of God?
- How do you put your beliefs into practice?
- What obligation, if any, do the educated have in advocating for those in exile or those who have no power?
- How does persecution test the faithful? Name some examples.

*Read Daniel 12:1–14*

Daniel does not mention the Messiah (“Anointed One”), who in the last days would appear as God’s agent, either to execute judgment on Israel’s oppressors or to rule over God’s people in righteousness.

- Compare the visions and term “Son of Man” used by Daniel, Jesus (Mark 13:3–37) and John (Revelation 1:12–20). How are they similar? How are they different?
- Where is God’s justice?
- Who do we have that preserves the traditions of the past and present today?
- What would you say to those who would predict that the end times are at hand today?

**Concluding thoughts:**

- What are the most significant insights you have gleaned from reading the book of Daniel?
- Is Daniel an explanation of past events or for all time?
- As you look to the future, what does the apocalyptic literature suggest to you about what is to come and your understanding of your ministry in the future?
- Which of Daniel’s visions challenge you the most?
- How different are you for having engaged in this study?
- What is God calling you to do in light of your study?

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