

An Invitation to the Book of Daniel: Neither Diet Plans, Nor Date-Setting, Nor Dares to Be Like Daniel

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What is Daniel about?

There are lots of answers to this question, but not all of them are equal. Like so many books of the Bible, Daniel is often “used” more than “read.” And when readers “use” Daniel they come up with diet plans, end-times dating schemes, and moralistic teachings devoid of gospel power. To be sure, Daniel does talk about food, future events, and bold faithfulness, but until we understand that Daniel is a book about God and the arrival of his eternal kingdom, we will miss much of the message.

So again, what is Daniel about? Let me answer that in six ways—three negative, three positive.

Six Things About Daniel

1. Daniel Does Not Give a Diet Plan

In 2013, Rick Warren teamed up with three doctors to write a book on changing his diet and yours. The title of his book brings us to Daniel, [*The Daniel Plan: 40 Days to a Healthier Life*](#). While the book is not really about Daniel 1, its name comes from this chapter. Yet, Daniel 1 is not a chapter which prescribes vegetables for dinner, nor is it a chapter that denies the place of eating meat (cf. Gen. 9:3; Acts 10). Rather, it is competition (a test) between the ways of God and the ways of Babylon. As the introductory chapter in a book that will compare and contrast the sovereignty of Yahweh with the sovereignty of the world’s strongest nations/rulers, this “test” of food will pit four royal sons against Nebuchadnezzar’s servants.

Indeed, food matters to God. First Corinthians 10:31 says that whether we eat or drink or whatever we do, we are to do all things to the glory of God. And thus, Daniel has something to say about who feeds us and where we find our food, but it does not prescribe a diet plan. Rather, it gives us something much better to chew on.

2. Daniel Does Not Offer a Definitive Dating System to the Last Days

Eschatology runs throughout the entire Bible. God’s plan for the end (*eschatos*) begins in the beginning. As Isaiah states, “I am God, and there is none like me, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done” (46:9–10). Likewise, Jesus speaks of God’s kingdom as something prepared from the foundation of the world (Matt. 25:34).

In Daniel, we find specific mention of the last days (2:28), days when God's eternal kingdom will come to the earth supplanting all earthly kingdoms (see 2:44–45). Daniel 2 also introduces the idea of a revealed "mystery" (see 2:19, 27, 30, 47), a term that Paul uses to explain the coming of Christ (Col. 1:27), the content of the gospel (Rom. 16:25), and the inclusion of Gentiles (Eph. 3:6)—to name only a few applications. Daniel 7:13–14 speaks of the Son of Man who will sit on God's throne. And Daniel 9:24–27 describes events that lead to the coming of Christ.

In short, Daniel, whom Jesus calls a prophet (Matthew 24:15; Mark 13:14), is predictive of future events. While critical scholars argue that Daniel is written later (in the 2nd C. B.C.) and only *presented* as predictive, I believe God gave Daniel visions of the future, just as the book describes.

That being said, these revelations are centered on Christ (see 1 Pet. 1:10–12), not a speculative dating system for the end of the world—never mind what Hal Lindsay and Tim LaHaye have said. These revelations, given to Daniel during the period of the exile, point to the Messiah who will bring Israel out of exile—not just geographically, but spiritually too (see Dan. 9:24–27). In this way, Daniel is radically devoted to Christ, not just chronology told beforehand.

When read in comparison with the New Testament, we come to see that the prophecies of Daniel are fulfilled in the death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ. In other words, Daniel does not skip over Jesus to describe world events that are still future for us today. Rather, as the New Testament teaches, the last days have come in the resurrection of Christ and the inauguration of Christ's kingdom (see e.g., Acts 2:17; Heb. 1:2).

Again, Daniel does not give us a dating system to work out today. He gives us something far better—namely, the One who inaugurates the last days, Jesus Christ the Son of Man who reigns in heaven today and will soon reign on the earth.

3. Daniel Does Not (Just) Dare to Be Like Daniel

In his commentary on Daniel, Tremper Longman makes this important point.

The Bible is a book about God. Daniel is no exception; it too is a book about God. We emphasize this at the beginning because the focus of the camera, to use a film analogy, is often on the human characters: Daniel, the three friends, Nebuchadnezzar, Belshazzar, Darius, Cyrus. But we must not be misled; Daniel's main function is to reveal God to us, the readers. (*Daniel*, 20)

Rightly, Longman reminds us that the Word inspired by God is first and foremost about its Author. Daniel does more, therefore, than provide a list of moral tales to inspire and imitate. It is a book to generate faith, hope, and love in the God who saves and sustains his people, even when he hands them over to their enemies (see Dan. 1:1–2).

At the same time, such faith in God should lead to greater faithfulness. Paul speaks of the stories of Israel as written down for our example (1 Cor. 10:6, 11). Daniel is no different. While it reveals God and his sovereign rule, it does spur us on to love and good deeds. Therefore, "Dare to be a Daniel" is not inappropriate, it is thoroughly biblical. However, when we look to imitate biblical characters, we should always see how these figures place their faith in God and his Messiah. Only when our actions are rooted in Christ-centered faith will loving obedience endure.

4. Daniel is a Book of Dreams

Daniel has been called an apocalyptic book, and rightfully so. The word “apocalypse” means “revelation.” In Israel, apocalyptic literature is a unique genre and literary form associated with Israel’s suffering among the nations. Apocalyptic literature depended heavily on symbolism and reveals heavenly realities, often mediated by angelic figures. In Daniel, these features are present, as are the use of dreams to communicate heavenly realities to Nebuchadnezzar and Daniel.

These dreams are found both in the more historical section of the book (ch. 1–6) and in the more apocalyptic section (ch. 7–12). The dreams are one way the book holds together. And as revealed in Daniel 1, Daniel is taught in the language and literature of the Chaldeans, a people known for their interpretation of dreams.

Still, it is not his earthly education that makes him wise to interpret dreams; it is the Lord who gives him such wisdom. As Daniel 1:17 says of Daniel and his three friends: “As for these four youths, God gave them learning and skill in all literature and wisdom, and Daniel had understanding in all visions and dreams.” Therefore, as we read Daniel, we should see how the God of heaven is revealing himself to his people on earth and using dreams to do it.

5. Daniel is a Vision of God’s Dominion

If there is one thing that unifies the book of Daniel it is the vision of God’s kingdom that comes in Daniel 2, 4, 5, and 7. Instead of explaining, let me share the key verses. While Babylon and Persia and their kings appear to have defeated Jerusalem and its kings, the truth is that the King in heaven rules the nations and dictates what dictators do. In each historical narrative, we even find how the Lord of heaven brings these foreign kings to confess his greater dominion. These are the key verses you need to see in Daniel which show a unified message in the book.

Daniel 2:20–23 (ESV)

²⁰ Daniel answered and said: “Blessed be the name of God forever and ever, to whom belong wisdom and might. ²¹ He changes times and seasons; he removes kings and sets up kings; he gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to those who have understanding; ²² he reveals deep and hidden things; he knows what is in the darkness, and the light dwells with him. ²³ To you, O God of my fathers, I give thanks and praise, for you have given me wisdom and might, and have now made known to me what we asked of you, for you have made known to us the king’s matter.”

Daniel 4:34–35 (ESV)

³⁴ At the end of the days I, Nebuchadnezzar, lifted my eyes to heaven, and my reason returned to me, and I blessed the Most High, and praised and honored him who lives forever, for his dominion is an everlasting dominion, and his kingdom endures from generation to generation; ³⁵ all the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, and he does according to his will among the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth; and none can stay his hand or say to him, “What have you done?”

Daniel 6:25–27 (ESV)

²⁵ Then King Darius wrote to all the peoples, nations, and languages that dwell in all the earth: "Peace be multiplied to you. ²⁶ I make a decree, that in all my royal dominion people are to tremble and fear before the God of Daniel, for he is the living God, enduring forever; his kingdom shall never be destroyed, and his dominion shall be to the end. ²⁷ He delivers and rescues; he works signs and wonders in heaven and on earth, he who has saved Daniel from the power of the lions."

Daniel 7:13–14 (ESV)

¹³ "I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. ¹⁴ And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed.

6. Daniel Promises Resurrection from the Dead

In the New Testament, the kingship of Christ is confirmed when Jesus is raised from the dead and seated at God's right hand. Importantly, the book of Daniel, which speaks at length of God's kingdom, also introduces the subject of resurrection. In Daniel we see two narratives where death is pronounced upon Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in chapter 3 and then on Daniel in chapter 6. In these two episodes, we find a death-to-life experience which foreshadows a hope of resurrection.

Yet, resurrection in Daniel is not only implicit, it is also explicit. As Daniel 12:1–3 describes, there is a day in the future when the sons of light will be raised to life from the dust of death.

¹ "At that time shall arise Michael, the great prince who has charge of your people. And there shall be a time of trouble, such as never has been since there was a nation till that time. But at that time your people shall be delivered, everyone whose name shall be found written in the book. ² And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. ³ And those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky above; and those who turn many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever.

These verses bring the book to a close. They introduce the final section of Daniel and they bring into focus the promise that God who reigns supreme over all creation is able to raise the dead to life. Throughout Daniel, for close to seven decades (605–539/37 BC), we see how God has miraculously intervened to protect and preserve Daniel. And now as the book ends, there is a greater promise—those who die in the Lord are yet secured in his kingdom for all eternity.

It is this final promise of resurrection that seals the book of Daniel as a book of hope for those living in a hostile age—both in Daniel's day and ours! While hope is hinted in Daniel 1:21, as Daniel's lifespan is revealed there—he survives the reign of Babylon until the days of Cyrus, the king who returns Israel to Jerusalem—the greater hope for us is the fact that God's kingdom is one that overcomes the grave for all those whose sins are forgiven the sacrifice of the Son of Man (cf. Daniel 9:24–27).

This is the good news of Daniel. And it teaches us why this book is so important for us today. Tomorrow our church begins a sermon series on Daniel. May God grant us grace to seek his kingdom and his righteousness, with wisdom and insight from the book of Daniel.

Soli Deo Gloria, ds