

The man behind the headlines ... Intro to Daniel

Daniel is my hero. He always has been. The chances are, he always will be. As a young boy growing up in Bangor, Northern Ireland, I learned a wee chorus in Ebenezer Sunday School that was penned by Philip P Bliss away back in 1873.

God used it to set my heart on fire: Dare to be a Daniel, dare to stand alone, dare to have a purpose firm, and dare to make it known.

There is something special about a man like Daniel. He stands out in a crowd. He has magnetic qualities which are hugely attractive. We are drawn to him with ease.

We like what we see and hear. And the good news is, he is made of the same material as the rest of us lesser mortals.

Daniel is one of four eminent Old Testament prophets who share one trait in common. Each one talks about something which is lost: one, Isaiah, the distinguished evangelical prophet who takes us to the Everest of Christology, is speaking about a lost revelation;

two, Jeremiah, the weeping prophet who ploughed a lonely furrow for God, is appropriately talking about a lost joy; three, Ezekiel battled against all the odds as he mimed in open air theatre the message God entrusted to him of a lost glory; and, four, Daniel, the last of this illustrious quartet, addressed the matter of a lost kingdom.

What's so special about this book? You can read all about Alexander the Great, Antiochous Epiphanes, and many other incredible

characters from a bygone era; people you first met in a history class in school were actually spoken about on the pages of scripture.

You can see the rise and fall of four global empires; what is even more amazing is that Daniel tells us precisely how it will happen, and true enough, when the time was right, and the day dawned, it came to pass! All in chapters 2, 7, and 8.

You can discover more about the devil's messiah or the Antichrist as he's better known, he's an endtime superman, someone under satanic influence and control; he's the devil's puppet on a string. Meet him in chapters 7, 9, and 11.

You can watch the moving drama unfold for the nation of Israel as you come to terms with the answer to Daniel's long prayer in chapter nine.

The pieces in the prophetic jigsaw all come together when God is calling all the shots.

You can discern shades of Europe and a coming together of many Western nations as the dream of the metallic man is interpreted for us in chapters 2 and 7.

And you'll definitely meet the man who was thrown to the lions in chapter 6, and the trio of young men who were hurled into a towering inferno in chapter 3, and the king who was put out to grass for a few years in chapter 4, and if that's not enough to blow your mind, all five lived to tell the tale.

Someone has said: 'the tragedy of today is that we have run out of things we are prepared to die for ... that is disastrous, because those who have nothing to die for have nothing to live for.'

For me, that's where the book of Daniel is of mega importance, it provides us with models of potential martyrs. It's about living well, and dying well.

This epic book is for adults, not only children. To turn it into a children's thriller is to blunt the seriousness of its message. Within its pages, there are sizzling stories about ruthless political tyranny, civil disobedience, religious persecution, and martyrdom.

The question is: What about the man at the centre of the story?

He was a captive

Daniel was forcibly removed from his home in Jerusalem and carried captive by the reigning Nebuchadnezzar to Babylon in 605 BC. Presumably, he was in his mid-teens, maybe 15 or 16 years of age.

He was born and reared during a great spiritual awakening which swept across the nation in the days of godly Josiah. He was a king who outshone Asa, Hezekiah, and Jehoshaphat in godly zeal and influence.

The historical account in 2 Kings 22-23 shows that Josiah repaired the temple, he recovered the law, he called for repentance, he led reforms, he returned God's word to the centre of Israel's life, he got rid of ungodly priests, and he restored the celebration of Passover.

Unlike many of us, Daniel was privileged to live through times of revival and restoration. It seems likely that such exposure to a deep work of God stood him in good stead in later life. And without doubt, it seems that he was massively influenced by the preaching of the

word of the Lord through Jeremiah. God fashioned him during his formative years.

It is clear from the biblical narrative that Daniel knew his God intimately; he came to know and love Yahweh through reading the Torah scrolls, and as a consequence, performed a host of amazing exploits for him.

When we consider the significance of his name and its meaning—*God is my judge*—it casts light on his every move.

What God thinks and what God does matters more to him than what anybody else in the whole world thinks or does. That was how Daniel lived! And died.

He was committed

Even a casual overview of Daniel's life leads to one outstanding conclusion – all that mattered to him was doing the will of God. As one friend said to me, 'Daniel was controlled, compelled, and corralled by the word of God and the love of God.'

Because the will of God is always in sync with the word of God, for him, in the best of times and worst of times, God was Number One. His long and fruitful life revolved around a conscious awareness of the presence of the sovereign Lord for God was with him.

And he knew it!

His handle on life was coloured by an appreciation of the sensational power of one who calls all the shots. Daniel's life was centred on God, it was built on God. And his way of looking at the world was drenched with God. He was God's man, he was a man of God.

Picture the scene: Daniel was virtually a prisoner in an alien, atheistic land ... he was

a hostage to fortune in a pagan, foreign country ... he is numbered among the ethnic minority in a culture he knows nothing about ... his home, his family, many of his close boyhood friends are nowhere near, and still, even when he lost most of his stuff, God meant everything to him.

Prayer was his habit, faith was his hallmark, and God was his priority!

When some of the refugees were downcast and hung their harps on the poplars, when others lamented their fate and wept on the banks of the River Chebar, when more turned sour and bitterly implored, 'How can we sing the songs of the Lord while in a foreign land?' (Psalm 137:4).

Daniel was content to leave the outcome in the strong hand of a God of gracious providence, because he knew in his heart that God rules and overrules! He may be in exile, his God is not.

Our faith is to bloom and blossom wherever God has planted us, be that in Belfast or Baltimore, Beijing or Bogota, Budapest or Babylon. Or even in Cumnock and Doon Valley!

He was courageous

As a relatively young man, Daniel dared to stand for God and truth. From day one, he unashamedly stood up for what he passionately believed. No one was going to mess around with him and his godly standards. He was no doormat! No pushover. How natural and easy it would have been for Daniel to cave in under intense pressure. Compromise, and the thought of it, may have

crossed his mind, but by God's enabling grace he embraced God's plan.

When crunch time came, Daniel chose God. I mean, he could have saved himself a lot of hassle if he had reasoned, 'When in Babylon, do as the Babylonians do.'

Daniel and his friends did not prioritise their own pleasures. They did not even prioritise their own promotion. They resolved to prioritise purity and principle. He knew where and when to draw the line. He did not isolate himself from the culture around him, but he did insulate himself from it.

When his walk with God in chapter one is challenged, he purposed in his heart. When his witness for God is under serious threat in chapter two, he takes it to the Lord in prayer. When his worship of God is in grave danger in chapter three, he knows that God's way is always the best way.

When you are faced with a choice, always choose Christ. In other words, when God says yes, we say yes, and when God says no, we say no! And it has to be said, that resolute, non-compromising mindset takes grit and gumption.

He was commended

The unfolding story of Daniel is a classic tale of rags to riches – about a young Jewish lad, unceremoniously dragged from home and deported 800 miles east, who rose to become prime minister in the imperial government of Babylon.

Like Joseph before him, he was elevated to a position of authority and influence in the palace and beyond.

In the public sector, the Babylonian Civil Service, Daniel was within touching distance of the top rung of the ladder in terms of plum jobs!

As an incredibly loyal servant of the Most High God, Daniel discovered in his own life and work that the divine promise held true: 'Them who honour me, I will honour them' (1 Samuel 2:30).

Was Daniel a flash in the pan or a seven-day wonder? How did he fare in the popularity ratings? Well, Ezekiel writes about him and describes him as a righteous man (Ezekiel 14:14, 20). The Lord Jesus, in his highly acclaimed Olivet discourse, viewed him as 'a prophet' (Matthew 24:15).

The writer to the Hebrews hints that he was a man of outstanding faith (Hebrews 11:33).

God refers to him as a man 'highly esteemed' (Daniel 10:11).

It is patently obvious from each of these unsolicited character references that they unite to pay fulsome tribute to one who is both a saint and a seer.

By way of explanation

The layout and design of the book is most interesting and instructive. There are two facets worth mentioning:

it is bilingual in that two languages are used in its composition. From 2:4b to 7:28 it is written in Aramaic and, therefore, resonates especially with the Gentile peoples. On the other hand, from 1:1 to 2:4a as well as chapters 8-12, it is penned in Hebrew and, therefore, appeals primarily to the Jewish people.

it is bi-literal in that it is a book of two halves. The first six chapters tend to be more historical in nature; the remaining chapters, 7-12, are labelled as prophetic because they focus on the future.

In your copy of the Bible and mine, Daniel is found in the section devoted to prophetic books where he comfortably sits alongside the Big Three of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, and is immediately followed by a dozen so-called Minor Prophets.

However, in the Hebrew Old Testament, the Tanakh, with its three divisions – the Law (Torah), Prophets (Nevi'im), and Writings (Ketuvim) – Daniel is located in the last of these.

Let me explain: it was placed amongst the writings of the Old Testament as opposed to the prophets because, in the eyes of Jewish scholars, Daniel was different from Ezekiel, Isaiah, and Jeremiah.

Daniel did not hold the office of a prophet, he was not from the school of the prophets, or known as one of the sons of the prophets, he was a statesman whom the Lord endowed with a distinctive prophetic gift.

In terms of the chronology of the book, it is helpful to realise that it goes like this: chapters 1, 2, 3, and 4 are followed by chapters 7 and 8; only then do we come to chapter 5, which is immediately followed by chapters 9 and 6; then it is through to the end with chapters 10, 11, and 12.

The aim of the book

It is an eye-popping illustration of pure dedication and faithfulness to the living God. One man's life is used as a first-class

example of what it means to surrender all to God and how we can survive in a pagan, permissive, and perverted culture.

As a result, the blessings and benefits that flow from such a yielded heart are phenomenal. And, indeed, that is what God is looking for among his people in the twenty-first century.

That said, the focus is not exclusively on a man, for over-arching the entire journal is the jaw-dropping faithfulness of Daniel's God. It is not a biography of Daniel's life, not a book about the history of Israel, and not a theology of the Hebrews.

The main beam is shining beyond Daniel to the great God of heaven. This golden thread is woven into the multicoloured fabric of Daniel; the sovereignty of God, the faithfulness of God, the kindness of God, and the integrity of God shine out from every page.

Simply put, the book of Daniel is about Daniel's God! It's a book of changing kings, and an unchanging God.

Daniel's core conviction is reflected in his reply to the king when he acknowledged, *there is a God in heaven* (Daniel 2:21). God is the real hero in the drama. Amidst the inky blackness of world affairs and the murky underworld of Satan and his emissaries, that is a potent truth.

Why? Because it makes a colossal difference. Personally, nationally, globally, the Lord is king! God is in charge. He runs the entire show. Our God reigns!

When life turns sour, God's promises are sweet

The question is often asked by bewildered saints and others who have passed through some devastating experience: 'Where was God when such-and-such happened?' Did Daniel's mother and father ask that question? Probably. Did Daniel himself voice it on more than one occasion? Possibly.

This was certainly not the life that they intended for their beloved son. It was the last thing on Daniel's mind as he entered his teenage years.

For every family in the Land whose lives were forever changed because of Nebuchadnezzar, it was traumatic, tearful, and terrifying. For us, when life takes an unexpected turn from our short-sighted perspective, I think we can do no better than turn to Daniel and see how he came through the other side.

Given time and an infusion of God's grace, he emerged a better man whose trust in his God is the stuff of legend. 'All our trials are important and connected punctuation marks in the biography of grace he is writing in our lives.' For Daniel and his friends, they are all part of the tapestry he is weaving in history. The book is an eye-opener in that it reveals God's constant, continuing care and compassion for his ancient, covenant people, Israel. The sons of father Abraham are an integral part of his plan and purpose for the world.

Even in exile, they remained 'the apple of his eye' (Zechariah 2:8). 'There are thunders in heaven when the apple of the Lord's eye is touched on earth.'

For a Jewish person, the message is one of supreme comfort in that it points forward down the centuries to the advent of the Messiah and beyond that event to a proposed millennial kingdom.

For you and me, Daniel speaks to God's exiled people today (1 Peter 1:1) who still wait for a better king and better kingdom.

The railway lines of Scripture

It is vital when studying the book of Daniel that we keep in the front of our minds that it runs in tandem with the New Testament book of Revelation. Basically, one explains the other! Both books are apocalyptic, visionary, and eschatological; both contain lots and lots of important information relevant to the last days in the lead-up to the second coming of Jesus Christ.

As an aside, one man who has studied the history of the church concluded that among persecuted believers around the world the two most favoured books in the Bible are Daniel and Revelation. Why? Because both teach that in the end our God wins!

In fact, I read just a couple of days back that the Chinese government reckons the book of Daniel to be 'very dangerous' - why - because he is a model for how to survive in hard times ... and the church there has flourished in recent years.