

**Keeping Faith
in a Distant Land:
Lessons from the Book of Daniel**

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The Book of Daniel: An Introduction

The book of Daniel has long inspired Jews and Christians with its lessons of faithfulness amid adverse circumstances. As a story of people who remained faithful to God even when the powers that be threatened their very existence, this book offers us as well some basic orientations that will help us think and act in ways consistent with our Christian commitments.

In reading the book of Daniel, it is important to keep a few things in mind.

- ✚ First, Daniel is really two books in one. Chapters 1-6 contain a series of stories about wise Jews at the royal court. Chapters 7-12 contain several visions about a future resolution of the conflict between good and evil. Also, the book is written in two different languages: 1:1-2:4a and 8:1-12:13 are in Hebrew, while 2:4b-7:28 are in Aramaic. There are several reasons for this, but the effect is interesting because it allows the stories of life at the Babylonian court to capture the aura of foreignness even in the language they use.
- ✚ Second, the two parts of the book are nevertheless interlinked, not only because they are about the same person, but also because they consider the same problem – how to be God’s people under foreign, pagan rule. Literarily, chapters 2-7 are arranged in a ring structure: 2 and 7 are visions of the coming divine kingdom; 3 and 6 are about potential martyrdom of Jews who worship God alone; and 4 and 5 are about arrogant kings.
- ✚ Third, the book covers events over a period of several centuries. The stories describe the Jews’ exile under the Babylonians in the 500s B.C., while the visions concern mostly events from Alexander the Great down to the Jewish revolt of the 160s B.C. Whatever the time period, however, the major theological issues are the same.
- ✚ Fourth, the hero of these stories is God, who speaks through his servant Daniel even to the powerful. God’s words of judgment and hope inspire the book’s readers with the knowledge that the powers that be do not live forever and that present adversity will soon give way to a time of triumph.
- ✚ Fifth, there are also human heroes, Daniel and his three friends, who must make tough decisions about how to live faithfully in a foreign land. These stories must have inspired Jews living under similar constraints.
- ✚ Sixth, the visions of the last half of the book do not describe a far distant future. Rather, they describe a time in real history, the early second century B.C., when Jews in Palestine had to fight for the very survival of their faith and their people. The visions are not merely descriptions of history. They are also sermons of hope.
- ✚ Seventh, the book of Daniel provided visionary language for later prophets to use in interpreting their own times. The most obvious example of this process is the book of Revelation, which applies Daniel’s language to the Roman Empire of the first century. Whenever God’s people are under duress, such language helps express the hope we feel in the midst of turmoil because we know that God is still God. This does not mean, however, that Daniel and Revelation are referring to the same historical events. They are describing similar, parallel events instead.

Historical Issues

As already mentioned the book of Daniel covers events of several centuries. Perhaps a time line will help us understand the background of the book. (All dates are B.C.)

605	Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon makes Judah a vassal state
586	Nebuchadnezzar destroys Jerusalem and ends the state of Judah
539	Babylon's last king, Nabonidus, and his son Belshazzar lose their kingdom to the Persian emperor Cyrus
334-22	Alexander the Great, king of Macedonia, destroys the Persian empire
301	Alexander's successor divide his empire; Palestine comes under the rule of Ptolemy, now king of Egypt
200	Palestine passes to the Seleucid dynasty, rulers of Syria and Mesopotamia
168-64	Antiochus Epiphanes, king of Syria, tries to impose the worship of Greek gods on the Jewish population, which in turn revolts
164	Antiochus dies; there are no later events referred to in the visions of Daniel

The historical background of the book is important because the author is trying to do theology against the backdrop of imperial power and its constant changes. Amid such changing scenes, he seems to say, it is important to keep your head, to remember that God is truly in charge, and that the right will win in the end. Sometimes, he knows, this hopeful vision seems unrealistic, but nevertheless it is true.

The first half of the book concerns the era of the Neo-Babylonian empire. Here we see life at court, as a courtier like Daniel tries to live faithfully to God and loyally to his king, despite the fact that some of his royal masters are less than sensible. Here the book echoes a theme that is widespread in Jewish literature of the Second Temple period, the foolishness of the Gentile king. Compare the drunken, out-of-control Ahasuerus in the book of Esther or dismissive statements about kings in Ecclesiastes. Jews took a dim view of foreign royalty. In this they share the attitudes of other people subject to the great empires. So we see a portrayal of the Persian kings in Greek texts that is remarkably like that of Esther.

These chapters do, however, believe that faithful people can survive in the dominant system. By attending to prayer and food laws and by avoiding idolatry and acts of injustice, the good Jew can excel, even at court. Indeed, such a person's success can be a sign of God's protection of the chosen people.

The second half of the book takes a different view. Here events have darkened the picture. No longer can we survive under the present conditions of empire. And so God will intervene to rectify the situation and bring in his Kingdom. The shift is understandable in the light of the changing conditions of the second century B.C., as Jews came under increasing pressure to assimilate to Hellenistic ways of life.

Theological Issues

The theology of Daniel has several components that deserve attention. Although the author does not try to lay his points out systematically – after all, he is telling a story – still we can discern the main outlines of his thought.

- ✚ Yahweh, the God of Israel, is in fact the only God. God reveals the future to whomever he wishes. God judges kingdoms and rulers on the basis of their behavior, particularly as regards their treatment of the poor and vulnerable.
- ✚ God insures the continuity of the story of Israel. Even in Exile, under the most terrible conditions, God redeems the Chosen People and provides for them. Since many Jews never returned to the land of Israel but continued to live in the Diaspora, such a vision of the universality of God was extremely important.
- ✚ Israel thus does not exist as a group of people by virtue of their location in a given locale, even a land “flowing with milk and honey” promised to the ancestors (as Deuteronomy emphasizes), but because of their commitment to the basic norms of the Law. Daniel especially emphasizes observance of the food laws (chap. 1), avoidance of idolatry, and prayer toward Jerusalem. These boundary issues make a person a Jew, and thus a faithful person.
- ✚ Prayer in this view is more than just a filler activity. It is an act of radical orientation to the ultimate reality. Prayer brings the faithful person into contact with both God and other people at prayer, and thus with the Jewish people throughout the ages.
- ✚ Israel lives in a hostile world (esp. in chapters 7-12) in which the powers that be both worship false gods and live by false mores. The visions of the crisis of the second century in particular wish to portray the fragility of the seemingly invincible evil empires. They fall under God’s judgment because of their unethical behavior.

Additions to Daniel The text of Daniel differs somewhat between the Hebrew/Aramaic version and the Greek translation or Septuagint. The latter includes three additions, which are particularly powerful. Between 3:23 and 3:24 the revisers of the book inserted the “Prayer of Azariah and the Song of the Three Young Men,” a poem that is 68 verses long and that combines lament and praise. After chapter 12, the revisers inserted two detective stories, “Bel and the Dragon” and “Susanna.” In the first, Daniel proves that the Babylonian god Marduk does not eat the sacrifices that people give him; the priests of Marduk do. In the second, Daniel defends a wrongly accused Jewish woman from lecherous old men she has spurned. All the stories pick up themes seen elsewhere in the book, especially the dangers of living under pagan rule and the need to honor God in spite of adversity. Most editions of the Apocrypha print these additions separately from the biblical book, often under the label “Additions to Daniel.”

Lessons from Daniel

Lesson 1: Introduction to Daniel (3:28-29; 4:37; 6:26-27; 12:9-13)

Goal: To introduce the book's basic structure and ideas; to put on the table the major theological claim that the Lord is ruler of time and space and acts to vindicate the faithful.

Textual Reflections: The texts of this lesson are summary statements at various points of the book, and they state its recurring themes. In chapters 1-6, we find Gentile kings confessing the core faith of Israel: God alone is God, and there is no other. The writer includes these summary statements in order to encourage his Jewish audience to hold onto their faith in God and to live in hopeful expectation of God's saving work. The kings recognize that God acts in conformity with justice, even when that means disrupting the powers that be in order to bring about greater justice. The text from chapter 12, because it comes from the more pessimistic second half of the book, states this call to faith in terms of waiting in times of adversity for the final resolution of history's problems. Daniel is to recognize (1) that adversity does not prove that God is absent, and (2) that his ability to endure will be crucial. The book of Daniel is calling its readers both to recognize that the world does not yet conform to God's ambitions for it, and to work for the day when it will.

Areas for discussion:

1. The book's discomfort with power reflects the minority status of Jews. How does our position in the world condition our views of God, the church, and ourselves as individuals?
2. Justice is a major concern in Daniel, as in all the Old Testament. How do our views of God and faith relate to our ideas about justice? Are their inconsistencies in our views and between our views and our practices?
3. How seriously do we take Daniel's eschatological anxiety, especially from chapter 12? Can we take this seriously today, given our own lifestyles?
4. To what degree do our church structures reflect our basic commitments to justice?
5. Wisdom is a major concern of the book. How do we cultivate wisdom?

Additional Texts: Deuteronomy 4; Joshua 24

Lesson 2: Keeping Faith in the Seat of Power (Daniel 1)

Goal: To reflect on the identifying marks of the community of God’s people. Clarity on this point seems fundamental to maintaining our true identity and thus carrying out our true mission.

Textual Reflections: This chapter contains a recognized form, stories of wise courtiers, which also appears in the Joseph story of Genesis and in non-biblical texts from the same era. The problem of the text is, what practices must the boys carry out in order to maintain their identity of Israelites in this pagan environment with its many temptations?

Daniel and his friends go to the seat of power, or rather they are dragged to it. They must, however, decide whether to uphold their ancestor food laws (rules of *kashrut*; they must eat *kosher* food) rather than the luxurious foods of the court. Why does this matter? Why pick this fight right out of the gate? Surely the point is to emphasize the food laws as a marker of Jewishness. But there is something deeper. Adherence to the Law of God even when it is inconvenient, even when personal advancement is at stake, will form a person in profoundly positive ways. The boys could have rationalized eating the food by emphasizing their own powerlessness or even by thinking that they could do good later by compromising now. They did not take these options. The text emphasizes the superior health benefits of kosher food, the wisdom of young, faithful people, the recognition by Gentiles of the truth of the boys’ faith.

On the other hand, a possible boundary issue is ignored: the names of the boys. They all receive good Babylonian (i.e., pagan) names. Thus Daniel (“God is my judge”) becomes Beltshazzar (“may the Lady [the Goddess] guard the king”), and so on. The person’s name is not a marker of true identity for the editor of the book of Daniel.

By combining these two issues, the story helps us confront the real questions we also have about what proper markers of our Christian identity can be.

Areas for Discussion:

1. What are the markers of Christian community today? What do we say the markers are, and what are they in practice? Are these the same? Why or why not?
2. What kinds of accommodation to the culture would cause us to lose our identity as the people of God? What kinds would not cause us to do so? Are there fixed rules on this point?
3. How do we form young people so that they attend to the identifying marks of the Christian community in their own lives?

Additional Texts: Amos 6; Galatians 5:13-26

Lesson 3: Keeping Faith in Expectation of God's Eternal Kingdom (Daniel 2)

Goal: To explore the nature of worldly power and its ultimate fragility; to elicit reflections on the relationships between the people of God and their surrounding cultures.

Textual Reflections: H. Richard Niebuhr once tried to describe the church's relationship to the surrounding culture as taking one of five possible forms: Christ opposing culture (the church opposes culture at many levels); Christ agreeing with culture; Christ fulfilling the aspirations of culture; Christ living in one world and culture in another; and Christ converting culture (Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* [New York: Harper, 1951]).

Daniel 2 describes a dream of Nebuchadnezzar. The text contrasts the Babylonian diviners, who have no access to divine insight, with Daniel, who does. Thus the contrast works on two levels: Daniel vs. the pagan soothsayers; Yahweh vs. the idols. Even more importantly, the dream sets up a contrast between God's eternal kingdom and those transient human kingdoms that dominate Israel.

The identity of the four kingdoms is disputed. While some marginal groups continue to identify the kingdoms with whatever empire is in power in their own time, scholars have fallen into two basic camps. Conservative scholars have identified them as: Babylon, Persia, Greece/Hellenistic kingdoms, and Rome. This typology rests on the assumption that the kingdoms of Daniel are exactly the same as those of the book of Revelation. Most scholars, however, understand the kingdoms to be: Babylon, Media, Persia, and Greece. This interpretation rests on several facts: (1) the visions of chapters 7-12 concern the Hellenistic kingdoms and nothing later (Rome is mentioned only as the Kittim in 11:30; they are not yet a dominant empire); (2) Greek ideas about four successive kingdoms, dating to the centuries just before and after the life of Jesus, identify these four kingdoms as a series. On the other hand, the fact that Media never dominated Israel presents a problem for this interpretation.

Either way you understand this series, the same point is clear: God will intervene in the affairs of the oppressive dominant powers in order to vindicate truth and right. The kingdoms of the world will give way to the kingdom of God.

Areas for Discussion:

1. Think about Niebuhr's typology of the Christian relationship to culture. Which model best fits our current situation? What are the strengths and weakness of this fit?
2. The text speaks of knowledge of the future used to analyze the present. How do Christians engage in social analysis today? What things ought we to consider as we try to engage our culture?
3. How does the unfolding of the Kingdom relate to our lives? What would change if we grew in our awareness of the presence of the reign of God in our world?

Note 1: Kingdom of God in the Old Testament. The term is rare, but it appears in 1 Chronicles 28:5 and 2 Chronicles 13:8. God is often called king. But the kingdom does not equal Israel, nor is it necessarily something far away. "Kingdom" is a metaphor for the perfect reign of God, which is breaking into the world. And so it is in Daniel.

Note 2: Reading visionary language. The language of visions always combines the literal and the metaphorical. So here we have the symbol of a multi-metaled statue with the realities of politics. The symbolic material can be reused as similar, but distinct events occur in real history.

Additional Texts: Matthew 13:31-58; Revelation 5:1-14

Lesson 4: Keeping Faith in the God Who is God (Daniel 3)

Goal: To identify ways in which working in the dominant system can draw us to false gods (things claiming our ultimate loyalties) and ways in which we can resist that seduction.

Textual Reflections: The text opens and closes with the actions of Nebuchadnezzar, indicating the degree to which faithfulness is a matter of response to the decisions of others. The three Hebrew men, now provincial governors, are victims of slander by opportunistic opponents, who charge them with not worshipping the king's gods and thus of being disloyal. Note that for the slanderers, true worship is an act of disloyalty to the dominant system. Then comes the extraordinary punishment of the three men, and their even more extraordinary deliverance.

The punch line of the story comes in verses 28-30, in which Nebuchadnezzar praises Yahweh and decrees the protection of the Jews. He recognizes the truth of Israel's core story: God is a deliverer who can rescue in unparalleled ways (see also Deuteronomy 1-4). And thus Nebuchadnezzar does what any good ruler should do. He protects the religion of his subjects.

Although enforced idolatry was rare in antiquity, Jews undoubtedly experienced the pressure of conformity on this point as they engaged in business dealings and other kinds of relationships with their pagan neighbors. Such relationships always produced pressure to assign ultimate value to things that were not God, and always must have produced the rationalization that, after all, such accommodation was the price of living as a minority in a non-Jewish culture. Also, martyrdom was not extraordinarily common, though it did happen. Stories about martyrdom – or as here, the divine rescue from impending martyrdom – served to encourage God's people to be faithful even under the most extreme circumstances.

Areas for Discussion:

1. Whereas the previous chapters show Jews enjoying success in a pagan environment, this story recognizes the possibility of danger. What sources of pain do you see in Christians' presence in a society that does not reflect Christian values in many respects? Where are the pressure points for us as individuals, or us as a community?
2. What sorts of objects, relationships, ideas, or social structures claim ultimate loyalty today?
3. Since martyrdom is not a realistic possibility for American Christians today, we might ask what the story could mean for us. In what ways could refusal to accommodate oneself to dominant realities harm us? How can or does God deliver us from such harm?

Additional Texts: Exodus 34:5-7; Psalm 90; Matthew 5:11-16

Lesson 5: Keeping faith in a God who Humbles the Proud (Daniel 4)

Goal: To reflect on how God interacts with the powers that be to make room for faith in Him.

Textual Reflections: This text, framed as a first-person narrative by Nebuchadnezzar himself, begins with a dream in which the mighty tree is leveled. Then Daniel interprets the dream as a divine judgment on the king for his arrogance. Curiously (given the events of the previous chapter), Daniel mourns the message of the dream, Nebuchadnezzar's impending punishment.

There are several historical problems associated with the text. One is that the Dead Sea Scrolls contain a similar story, but with Nebuchadnezzar's successor Nabonidus as the absentee king. In fact, we know that Nabonidus abandoned Babylon for several years in order to live in Teman, in what is now Saudi Arabia. Some scholars suggest, therefore, that this move lies as the basis of the story, which then gets transferred to Nebuchadnezzar, the better known king.

However that may be, what we have now is a morality tale about the arrogance of power. Note verse 27, the king's analysis of his own actions ("I built...my power, my glory"). Failure to give glory to God (in contrast with 3:29) provokes divine punishment.

We are probably instinctively uncomfortable with the radical nature of the story's critique of those in power. But the Bible consistently demands that those who hold power act in humility to bring about social justice. Wealth, power, and status should not be used to accumulate more of the same, but rather to help those who are vulnerable. God acts to upset those who work to hold up their power within the system. That's the claim of Scripture, from Exodus on. The question is, what do we do with such a claim?

Note verses 31-34, which offer the main theological claims of the chapter. God is the "most high" who reigns over an eternal kingdom (as opposed to all human kingdoms) and orders them as he sees fit. V. 32 alludes to Isaiah 40, with its claim that the nations (structures of power oppressing God's people) are nothing in the final analysis. God is also a God of justice, and given the ability of the powerful to act arrogantly to claim an ever greater share of power, status, and wealth, God's justice requires him to act to upset the status quo. Hence this story.

Areas for Discussion:

1. What are sources of arrogance for us in our lives within the dominant structures of society? What achievements of ours can produce such arrogance?
2. Given the persistence of evil in high places (at times), how believable is the Bible's notion that God humbles the proud and exalts the humble? In what ways do/can/should Christians work for such a reversal?
3. What is the difference between learning from failure or even punishment (as Nebuchadnezzar does) and not doing so?

Additional Texts: 1 Samuel 2:1-10; Luke 1:52-53; Philippians 2:5-11

Lesson 6: Keeping Faith by Remembering the Past (Daniel 5)

Goal: To consider ways in which we retrieve a usable past, that is, a recollection of the past that helps us do better in the present. To identify those elements of our own past that are or should be decisive in our thinking about Christian action in the future.

Textual Reflections: This chapter contains a story of royal extravagance, a popular theme in postexilic Jewish literature (compare Esther), as well as in contemporary Greek stories about the Persian court. Belshazzar, in reality the son and viceroy of Nabonidus, the last Babylonian king, throws a party using the vessels from the Jerusalem Temple, and he does so while the city is threatened by the hostile Persian armies. He thus combines sacrilege with utter obliviousness. Hence the terrifying appearance of handwriting (in Aramaic, the language he speaks in this chapter but cannot read!). As before, the wise Daniel must come to interpret the language of the text. It is an oracle of doom, fulfilled the very same night.

Some earlier themes of the book appear here: the superior insight of Daniel and thus the superior wisdom of God; the cluelessness of the king; revelation through dreams; the avoidance of luxury and privilege (verse 17); and the importance of submission to God on the part of the king. On the last point, note that the Bible regularly assumes that the powerful will model behavior that others will imitate, and therefore that it is important that people in power live in godly ways. The fact that this often does not occur has catastrophic outcomes in society. And so it is in this story.

In the Bible, a corollary of injustice is idolatry. Note the portrayal of other gods in verse 23: they are merely items manufactured from raw materials of the natural world. Worshipping them is absurd, and it leads to all sorts of vices.

Another theme, which this lesson might emphasize, in this text is the importance of memory. Belshazzar's courtiers remember the aged Daniel, who reminds the king of Nebuchadnezzar's rise and fall, which he interprets theologically in light of Israel's central ideas about the nature of God and God's actions in the world. The record of the past becomes a moral example for the present. Remembering the past is important because it helps us avoid mistakes through self-understanding and self-examination.

Areas for Discussion:

1. In most churches, members of several generations are present. We have, as it were, different pasts, different memories, and thus different expectations of the present and future. How do we talk about the past when we are together? How does our past shape the present? What did we learn before that we have forgotten? What do we still remember, perhaps even too well?
2. Remembering the past can be paralyzing or liberating. What past experiences of your congregation have been examples of God's liberating experience? When have you put God first in ways that were blessed?
3. Can you remember ways in which the pursuit of self-gratification by individuals or even groups of which you were a part have led to bad results? Explain.

Additional Texts: Deuteronomy 5:20-25; 1 Corinthians 10:1-13

Lesson 7: Praying to the Ever-Faithful God (Daniel 6)

Goal: To reflect on the centrality of prayer to the life of faith and to investigate the goal and addressee of prayer.

Textual Reflections: As in chapter 3, we see here slanderers blaming a potential Jewish martyr for not praying to idols. Again, the story ends with divine rescue and the king's worship. The king's confession in verse 27 acknowledges (as before) God's eternal reign and by implication the temporariness of the king's own.

Here, however, the emphasis is on prayer proper. Daniel's faithfulness is marked by the thrice daily practice of prayer toward Jerusalem. Prayer thus moves in several directions: upward to God; outward to Jerusalem; and inward to the faithful person's soul.

The importance of prayer in the Bible and in the life of faith can hardly be exaggerated. Prayer is not merely a way of gaining access to greater resources. It fundamentally challenges basic assumptions about the world, such as the idea that humans are ultimately in control of everything, or that a precise relationship between our actions and outcomes exists, or that what we have is what we deserve. Prayer directs us beyond ourselves to what is really real in the world. In prayer, we become concerned more for others, more in awe before the Creator, and thus more aware of our place in the larger world. Prayer reminds us of the fact that the powers that be are often mere illusions.

That Daniel prays toward Jerusalem is important. Jews in exile can still look toward home, even when they do not live there. Jerusalem – home – is the place of memory, of story, of God's saving actions. Thus praying toward Jerusalem allows Jews to connect to God's story and their own.

Suggestion: in this lesson it may be useful to read a few prayers, whether in the Bible or elsewhere in order to gain some sense of the options of prayer. One way might be to consider a lament and a hymn from the psalms. Psalms 120-34 are nice, brief examples of some options in prayer.

Areas for Discussion:

1. Consider the elements of biblical prayers. What elements do you see in them that are often absent from our own prayers? How could we recover some of these elements (e.g., lament)?
2. What are the assumptions behind the prayers of the Bible, regarding God's activity in the world, the desirable nature of human society, etc.? To what degree do we share those assumptions?
3. What would be the implications of a more vigorous prayer life in your congregation? How could such a situation come about?

Additional Texts: Psalms 120-134; Matthew 6:5-15

Lesson 8: Keeping Faith During The Darkest Hour (Daniel 7)

Goal: To delve into those sources of fear that call forth the resources of faith; to examine patterns of instability to which faithful people must respond.

Textual Reflections: The chapter repeats much of the material of chapter 2, with a similar notion of a succession of kingdoms. The climax of the crisis comes in verses 25-27, which envision the persecution of Jews by the Syrian king Antiochus Epiphanes (168-165 B.C.). Antiochus offered a pig in the Temple in Jerusalem and tried to suppress Judaism, actions that led to the Maccabean revolt. But Daniel announces the divine decision to bring an end to the persecution.

The text knows that Jews in the middle of this persecution must feel enormous anxiety and uncertainty. Will God help or not? Is it possible that all we have believed is false? Such questions must inevitably have arisen, and the text seeks to respond to them by reaffirming God's benevolent rule in the world.

The text also tries to set this persecution in the context of the era's rapid political and social changes, over which Jews had no control. We could conclude from such rapid change two things: the world is so unstable that we can be confident in nothing; or the world's instability is proof that momentary evils will pass away because underneath the instability is a calm stability anchored in the steadfastness of God. The writer wants us to elect the second conclusion.

An important theme in the text is divine judgment. We see the court of heaven in session (verses 9-14, 26) and hear its verdict of condemnation. There will be a battle between the forces of evil, embodied by Antiochus and all such tyrants (Domitian in Revelation, for example), and the forces of God. The eternal God (the Ancient of Days) installs as king one who looks like a human being. Revelation reinterprets this vision to refer to Jesus. Jewish interpreters sometimes understand the figure to be the messiah, sometimes a mighty angel like Gabriel. Daniel may have in mind a more human monarch, though the notion of cloudy accompaniment makes this difficult. But however we sort this out, the point is that God will intervene even in the darkest moments to aid his people. Evil will not triumph.

Areas for Discussion:

1. What sources of fear challenge the life of faith? What are we afraid of in our environment? How do we as a church respond to these sources of fear? These fears may be deeply individual or more communal in nature.
2. What resources for overcoming fear are available to us? How do we use those resources? How do we fail to do so?
3. In what ways does Jesus intervene in the moments of uncertainty facing our community? What expression of Jesus' nature and person best describe to you his work on our behalf?

Additional Texts: Psalm 88; 2 Corinthians 12:1-10

Lesson 9: Keeping Faith when Powers Rise and Fall (Daniel 8)

Goal: To continue the previous week's discussion of the sources of anxiety confronting faith.

Textual Reflections: The text depicts the rise and fall of Alexander the Great. The description of him as a he-goat probably comes from the fact that his coins portray him with horns, because he sought to present himself as the offspring of the Egyptian chief god, Ammon, who was a ram. Alexander invaded the vast Persian empire in 334 B.C. and gradually destroyed it. He died at age 33, master of the known world.

Jews in Jerusalem welcomed Alexander and generally got on well with his successors for the next century. But the instability following his invasion and death, and then the struggle for domination among his generals, inevitably created uncertainty for everyone in the Middle East, including Jews.

The little horn of verse 9 is, again, Antiochus Epiphanes, who defiled the Temple. As in the previous chapter, the audience must recognize that even the gravest threats to their faith cannot separate them from God.

The text tries to comfort its readers by noting that the arrogant claims of the king fail to prevent his untimely death. God does not allow the arrogant and smug to continue on their merry way.

Verses 11-14 focus upon the defilement of the Temple by Antiochus Epiphanes. The end of sacrifice could be construed to mean that Israel's sins were not atoned for, and thus that God might not protect His people. The text wants to assure its audience that such a conclusion is unwarranted. God is not bound even to the sacrifices He has commanded. Rather, a contrite people crying out to God will receive salvation.

This last point deserves some reflection. Getting the ritual right, though important, is not the most important thing. Faithfulness can take place even when letter-perfect worship is impossible. A second implication is that worship is not merely a human achievement, but is a gift that God's saving actions makes available to faithful people.

Areas for Discussion:

1. The text addresses the importance of worship to the community and at the same time places worship in a broader context. In what ways can worship be a unifying force in the community of faith? How can it help us find our place in the world? How can we overcome anxiety through worship?
2. Again, we see here the uncertainty caused by the decisions of the power who do not share the faith of the community. How do you see such decisions made today? What can or should Christians do in response to such decisions? How will our actions be kept faithful to our own core values and not merely be reactive or focused on trivial infractions?
3. In what areas have you seen, do you believe, God acting to thwart evil and bring about good? Give examples.

Additional Texts: Exodus 14:10-14; 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

Lesson 10: Keeping Faith with Scripture (Daniel 9)

Goal: To reflect on the overall purposes of Scripture and to identify ways in which deeper study of Scripture, translated into action in our lives, would help us grow spiritually.

Textual Reflections: The chapter reflects on the nature of divine revelation, particularly as it relates to human activity in the present. Daniel remembers that the prophets had predicted a seventy-year exile from the land, and he knows that the time is expiring. He thus prepares to pray to God for deliverance. He does not assume that the prophetic words can come true without human cooperation (repentance in this case). Rather, God's actions and human actions are closely intertwined. Several major themes are worth addressing.

First, verses 10 and 11 call God (and implicitly the prayer's Israelite audience) to reflect on the promises and laws of the ancient Scriptures (Law and prophets). The Bible thus becomes for Daniel a source of reflection on human sinfulness and redemption, the need for ethical behavior on the part of humans, and the reality of steadfast love and graciousness on the part of God. Scripture as promise and fulfillment is the dominant lens through which Daniel looks upon the earlier canonical writings.

Second, the prayer of Daniel seeks to understand the disaster that has befallen the nation as earned punishment for sin, specifically for idolatry and social injustice (the paired sins prevalent throughout the prophetic books).

Third, the return to the Promised Land, actually fulfilled in the late sixth century (as we see in Ezra, Nehemiah, Haggai, and Zechariah), is a prominent theme. God will restart the clock on the covenant people (see also Jeremiah 31). This restoration will be a further sign of God's care for Israel, and indeed all humankind (see Isaiah 40-55).

Areas for Discussion:

1. Scripture can be read from many points of view. What are the dominant ways, in your experience, in which the church uses the Bible? To what degree is it seen as a book of hope and judgment? How do we allow (or fail to allow) its complex views on human nature and experience to make themselves felt in the church today?
2. This text does not envision the ancient prophecies as working automatically regardless of Israel's behavior. What traits in Daniel's behavior, when generalized to others, would or could bring about God's saving work? To what degree do these actions have some effect on God today?
3. In what ways do we cooperate with God in bringing about his saving purposes today?

Additional Texts: Jeremiah 31; Romans 15:1-6

Lesson 11: Keeping Faith Until God Decides the Outcome (Daniel 10-11)

Goal: To enumerate and explore the characteristic markers of the community of faith, especially those that can be compromised when we are part of a world whose values are not entirely our own. In some ways, this lesson resumes the theme of Lesson 2, but at a deeper level, drawing on the class's reflections over the intervening weeks.

Textual Reflections: Chapters 10-12 form a continuous vision, the longest in the book. But 12:1 marks a transition with the unit, hence the limits of this lesson.

Chapters 10-11 repeat much of the previous visions. Again we read a lesson on Hellenistic history, particularly as it affected Jews in Palestine. Alexander's empire broke into several parts. The Seleucids in Syria and the Ptolemies in Egypt fought over Palestine, with the Seleucids eventually prevailing. The Seleucid monarch Antiochus Epiphanes sought to destroy Jewish religion. The text responds to this by indicating God's ultimate ability to overcome even the most terrible evil.

The repetition of the same basic vision, by the way, allows the book to persuade its audience of just this point. Repetition is a rhetorical device that can be very effective. And so it is here.

This section of the vision offers us important insight into the life of the persecuted community, especially in 11:32-39. Here we see some Jews seduced by Hellenism, the day's most sophisticated and gratifying lifestyle, others holding onto the core story of the faith, and still others confused. Those who remain faithful do not seem successful. They may even experience martyrdom. But the test of their success comes from their understanding of the story of God's deliverance, which will come again. All they need to do is wait.

These verses indicate the depth of the depravity of the enemy king. He even abandons his own ancestral gods, worshipping only himself. Antiochus's nickname, Epiphanes, means "God manifest," certainly not a title a Jew would find appropriately modest! The text thus offers a keen insight into the psychology of the powerful: power may trick us into thinking of ourselves as the ones truly in control.

Areas for Discussion:

1. Although faithfulness to the old can be a cry hijacked by the most reactionary and unthinking members of the Christian community, there is a point to the appeal. What elements of our past should we hold onto? Which reject? And why? How do we make these decisions?
2. 11:33 envisions the wise instructing others in the faith, even in times of tremendous challenge. How well do we as a Christian community do this? How could we do this better?
3. The text calls believers to wait, a call that Jesus later echoed. In what senses do we see ourselves as waiting? How does such expectation shape our view of ourselves, or our views of the culture surrounding us?

Additional Texts: Genesis 17:1-22; Matthew 24:45-25:13

Lesson 12: Keeping Faith until the Resurrection (Daniel 12)

Goal: To think through faithfulness in light of the ultimate destiny of believers.

Textual Reflection: This chapter is the only text in the Old Testament that clearly talks about a resurrection from the dead. Here it is promised as the result of God's decisive saving action. Like Jesus in Matthew 24, Daniel merges the saving events of a particular time into the final time of salvation, in which the dead are really raised. Timing is not the text's particular concern. The ultimate destiny of God's people is.

Like the New Testament, Daniel does not try to explain the precise timing of the resurrection, the nature of the resurrected human body, the specifics of the life of the blessed with God, or other questions that we as readers (and believers!) naturally ask. The focus is exclusively upon the divine promise that we will someday be saved, and evil will no longer threaten in any way. In the meantime, we persevere.

For Christians, the hope in resurrection offers the ultimate challenge to a belief in the supremacy of culture. We recognize that the powers that be will indeed disappear. We know that the pursuit of wealth, status, and power is futile because it misses the point of the purpose and destiny of our lives. Belief in resurrection causes us to reexamine some of our most cherished assumptions about what matters, and thus to rearrange our commitments and relationships.

Belief in resurrection calls for decision. We must decide which set of values will be ours, what our relationships will look like, what our practices will be. This is true both within the walls of our own community, which can begin to look like the worst aspects of the culture around us, and in our relationship to those beyond us.

Curiously, the community's faithfulness to its own story, rituals, and ethics allows it to be salt and light in the world and thus redeem the very culture whose values sometimes threaten us.

Areas for Discussion:

1. How real is belief in the resurrection to you and your church? What makes this an important part of our thinking? What elements of a resurrection faith could we take more seriously?
2. Given a belief in resurrection and thus of the radical relativizing of many of our aspirations and assumptions, what of our own practices should change? What would we like to see changed in the culture around us?
3. Tell stories of people whose lives reflected a belief in resurrection.

Additional Texts: 1 Corinthians 15:12-58

Lesson 13 Summary and Reflections

This lesson should be an opportunity to reflect on what we have learned.

Some recurring themes worth recalling:

- ✚ The power of God vs. the impotence of idols
- ✚ The justice of God vs. the complicity of idols in oppression
- ✚ God's wisdom vs. pagan wisdom
- ✚ Humility vs. arrogance
- ✚ Justice vs. injustice
- ✚ Faithfulness vs. accommodation
- ✚ The story of God vs. the story of the powers that be
- ✚ The permanence of the heavenly Kingdom vs. the transience of human realms
- ✚ The complexity of living faithfully in a world of multiple value systems. Note that Daniel works with several of H. Richard Niebuhr's strategies of linking Christ and culture, not just one. The book does not always simply try to play faith off against culture. The relationship is more complex and can shift, depending on the nature of the culture.

For Further Reading

Collins, John, *Daniel* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993).

Gowan, Donald E., *Daniel* (Abingdon Old Testament Commentaries; Nashville: Abingdon, 2001).

Henze, Matthias, *The Madness of King Nebuchadnezzar* (Leiden: Brill, 1999).

Rappaport, Uriel, "Maccabean Revolt," *Anchor Bible Dictionary* (1992) 4:433-39.