

Daniel: A Good Read

Valley Center Seventh-day Adventist Church
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To study history, particularly sacred history, is to trace the footprints of the divine in the dewy grasses of time. There is no study that is calculated to invigorate the mind and inform as accurately as the study of the Scriptures. With that in mind, I would like to begin a series based on the book of Daniel. I wish that somehow this book could be put on "Oprah Winfrey's book list," for it truly is a "good read." Today's study will be an introduction into the book of Daniel.

We'll take a look at

- Three reasons why we should study Daniel
- The term "prophecy" and its meaning
- The purpose of prophecy
- The format of the book of Daniel
- Four major themes in the book of Daniel

I. Three Reasons To Study Daniel

Why should we study the book of Daniel? I'd like to suggest three reasons. **First**, because Jesus Himself counseled us to read and understand this book. He put His stamp of approval on the authorship and content of this book when He said, "Whoever reads, let him understand." Matthew 24:15. This advice is given in the context of the disciples' question, "What will be the sign of Your coming and the of the end of the age?" so it is reasonable to conclude that the book of Daniel has a special message for those living at the end of time.

It is appropriate to study this book because ***Daniel's prophecies take us down to the "last days."*** Is there anyone today who seriously questions that we're living in the last days? The combining influence of so many fulfilled prophecies, with the conditions in the moral world, the spiritual world, the financial world and the social world all point that we are "there."

Every day on the news there are reports of disasters, calamities, political upheaval that read like the prophecies of the Scriptures. This week, there were more deadly tornadoes that ripped across our nation. Last Thursday I heard a news report that said that there were something like 25 tornado landings in the Midwest, just in that day!

Surely, the words of Jesus have come true. Everything that the Book says has come to pass! Only those with blinders on can't fail to see fulfilled prophecy in current events.

Secondly, the book of Daniel has a lot to do with the ***history and heritage of our church***. Knowing your "roots" is important. It was the study of this book of Daniel that sparked the movement headed by William Miller in the 1840's. Miller and his associates believed that the prophecy of Daniel 8 gave them sufficient information to predict that Christ would return to this earth in glory in October of 1844, and were of course greatly disappointed when He did not.

Some of these gave up religion altogether in their discouragement and went back to their old godless way of living. Others set new dates for His return, and continued in a cycle of prediction followed by disappointment.

A small number adopted another view of that prophecy of Daniel 8, believing that it had predicted, not Christ's return to this earth, but His beginning a new phase of His ministry, that of initiating the "final review" of heaven's records, which must conclude before His return. They believed that this constituted the message spoken of in Revelation 14, "the hour of His judgment is now come." The book of Daniel, they believed, was that "little book" that was "eaten" in the vision recorded in

Revelation 10, that was so sweet initially (representing the eager anticipation of looking forward to leaving this world soon and being with Jesus), that turned sour in the stomach (the disappointment that settled in after He didn't return).

That group, small in its inception, composed the nucleus of what was later to become the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Because, as they say, you can't know where you are unless you know where you've been, the study of the book of Daniel is most appropriate.

I want to plant a seed of thought in your mind at this point in our introduction to the prophecies of this book. And that is, that Seventh-day Adventists are by no means original regarding the interpretations of most of these prophecies. From time to time, I will share with you quotations from past students and scholars of these prophecies, many of them centuries, even millennia old, showing that most of these prophecies have been studied and understood, with a consistent accuracy, by believers from many ages. I want you to gain an insight that SDA's stand in a long line of those who have understood and proclaimed the prophecies the very same way that you and I do today, and that our interpretations of these prophecies (though they are understood differently by most of the Christian world today), are very much in line with the heritage of interpretation embraced by Christian believers throughout the ages.

Thirdly, Daniel's book is "foundational;" that is, the prophecies and themes he presents are the "building blocks" for later material. You can't grasp algebra and calculus unless you're mastered arithmetic! The prophecies of Revelation (toward which there is great interest today) are built directly on and tied to the prophecies of Daniel. Without a firm and accurate grasp of Daniel, the likelihood of misunderstanding the book of Revelation is higher.

A few years ago I was involved in a church building project in San Marcos. We had chosen to build our church with a product

called Eco-Block, an "insulated concrete form." Poured cement would later fill those re-bar reinforced forms to construct the walls. But before the Eco-Blocks could be snapped into position; before the horizontal re-bar could be laid to give them rigidity, the foundation had to be poured. There is a proper sequence in building a structure that must be followed.

In the same way, the study of the book of Daniel is like a foundation for the book of Revelation. Before we poured the slab for the San Marcos church, we attached re-bar rods every 16 inches that went from the foundation and rose vertically in the air. These later would extend into the cells of the Eco-Blocks and serve to "tie" the wall to the foundation when later the walls were poured with concrete. In the same way, there is a strong steel-like connection between the Old Testament book of Daniel and the New Testament book of Revelation.

II. The Term "Prophecy" and Two Types Of Prophecy

Let's think for a moment on the way the word "prophecy" is used in the Bible. The word, both in the Old Testament and in the New Testament, comes from the root "to speak." The word "prophecy" in our language comes directly from the New Testament word, and is made up of two parts: *pro* which means "for" or "in behalf of," (don't get confused by the Latin prefix *pro* which means "before") and *phemi*, which means "to speak."

At times another term was used to describe this function, "seer," (that is, "one who sees") which focused not on the speaking part, but the reception of the message of God; the prophet reported what he "saw" in his vision. The word "prophet" describes his giving the message to others, while the term "seer" focuses on the receiving part.

In a general sense then, a prophet is one who "speaks on behalf of another." It was in this sense that Aaron was called to be Moses' "prophet." (See Exodus 4:14-16; 7:1.) A prophet is a mouthpiece, a spokesman. So, "prophecy" is not at all limited to

the foretelling of the future; it can be speaking the Word of God as it relates to the past, present or future.

The person who “speaks for God” is a “prophet,” in the language of Paul in I Corinthians 12-14, though we recognize that when you and I “speak for God” as a parent teaching a child, or sharing the gospel with a neighbor, there is a difference of authority compared with those who “spoke for God” by direct revelation and whose writings compose what we call the Bible.

“Prophecy” has to do with “speaking for God” in a general sense. However, in a more limited sense, there is that class of prophecy which deals with the as yet unknown future. This is the **predictive aspect of prophecy**, which we usually think of when we use the term. Within this category, there are two components. There are prophecies which predict ***specific events***, of which there are many examples in the Bible.

Joseph’s dreams of the bowing grain stacks predicted the *specific event* of his elevation to the prime ministry of Egypt. Many prophets, like Isaiah and Jeremiah gave their voice to the *specific event* of the fall of Jerusalem. These predictive prophecies were focused primarily on one event.

On the other hand, the prophecies of Daniel and Revelation are unique in that they are what we might call **outline prophecies**. They take us from that current time, Daniel’s day, for example, all the way through to the establishment of God’s kingdom and the final overthrow of evil. They link several events on a continuous timeline that stretches from the present (whenever that was for them) to the end. It could be that Jesus’ prophecy in Matthew 24 should also be classified as an outline prophecy.

Something very important for us to recognize is that Daniel’s outline prophecies, are given in “parallel” and not “consecutive” form. That is, though the symbols might be different from chapter to chapter, the prophecies each basically cover the same ground

and are in "parallel" with each other. Each of Daniel's prophecies takes us from the (then) current through to the end.

III. The Purpose Of Prophecy

So far, we've looked at three reasons to study Daniel, and two types of prophecy. Now we'll look at the ***purpose of prophecy***. What purpose did God have in mind in giving these visions through Daniel to be shared with His people? Was it so that we would be able to predict tomorrow's events today? To be able to have "tomorrow's newspaper" ahead of its being printed? Not really. No, Jesus gives us the reason why prophecy was given. "And now I have told you before it comes, that when it does come to pass, **you may believe**." John 14:29.

Of course, God gave these messages to forewarn His people of major events, but more than that, they were **given to increase faith** when their fulfillment was accomplished. God asks us to believe Him, but He doesn't expect our faith to be "blind." Faith, according to Hebrews 11, is based on evidence, evidence that appeals to reasonable minds. As such, fulfilled prophecy is God's "exhibit A," that demonstrates that He is Who He says He is, and that all of His Word is reliable.

Concerning the futility of idolatry, in contrast with the worship of the living God, He says, "Let them (idols) bring forth and show us what will happen; let them show the former things, what they were, that we may consider them, and know the latter end of them, or declare to us things to come. ***Show the things that are to come hereafter, that we may know that you are gods.***" Isaiah 41:22, 23.

When we study Daniel's prophecies, we'll discover that four major kingdoms were predicted, three of which are named. Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece and then a fourth, Rome, are brought to view, with the fourth undergoing a fragmentation after its decline. Think of the odds of trying to predict which nations at that time (some of which really didn't exist when the prophecies

were given!) would occupy the central place in earth's history, and get all of them in the right order. Who's to say that Greece would come ahead of Rome, and not ahead of Medo-Persia, for example? And yet, God said exactly that.

History teachers for centuries have taught the same "march of the monarchies" that God predicted before these kingdoms were born. God gave us this information so that our faith can rest on firm footing, on some measurable concrete evidence. You can take any history book or encyclopedia and compare it with Daniel 2 or Daniel 7, and you will find confidence-building accuracy. Is there **proof** that God exists, or that His Word can be believed? No, but there is **strong evidence** which appeals to open minds, that He is God.

On many occasions, when the fulfillment of a prophecy was nearing, there was an expectation, an anticipation of its becoming reality, yet the details of exactly how it would come to pass were a bit fuzzy. But **when** those events were acted out and transitioned from prophecy to reality, and when a godly expositor explained them, then God's people could see the accuracy and timeliness of what had been predicted.

We might think of this as the "Emmaus Curriculum." You remember that the death of Jesus was met initially by His disciples as a great disappointment. They couldn't understand why things had happened as they did. Then that Sunday, walking to the town of Emmaus, Jesus explained to two of them how the Scriptures actually foretold these very things, and that what had happened that weekend was indeed an accurate fulfillment of those prophecies. Jesus explained to them the things in the Psalms and Prophets that told of His mission. In Acts chapter 8, Philip occupied the same role for the Ethiopian treasurer who pondered the meaning of what we call Isaiah 53. Looking back, we have no trouble in reading those Old Testament prophecies, but things were a bit fuzzy until the foretold event actually happened.

And, it is true also that when a major prophetic event took place, God provided someone through whom guidance could be given to aid in the correct understanding of those prophecies. Moses was there when the 400 years came to an end and it was time to leave Egypt and go to Canaan. Ezra and Nehemiah were there when the 70 years of captivity in Babylon reached their completion. Peter on the day of Pentecost explained certain prophecies of the Old Testament.

IV. The Format of Daniel

One other aspect of the prophecies of Daniel we'll consider briefly is the interesting marriage between prophecy and narrative, or story. Many of the chapters of Daniel contain a prophecy, as given within a story. The point we should see is that it is a serious mistake to overlook the stories of Daniel as a source of truth. Yes, his prophecies are challenging and stimulating, but don't neglect the stories in his book!

V. Four Major Themes In Daniel

Now we'll look at the four major themes in Daniel. They are

- God knows
- God cares
- God is in control and is involved
- God rewards

God knows. Prophecies are an indication that God is all-knowing, that the future is as open to Him as is the past. Prophecy provides evidence of God's omniscience, and is strong evidence of His deity. Ever since the beginning of time, after the fall in Eden when the curtain to the other side came down, there has been an almost insatiable curiosity to peer through that shield to the other side. Human beings want to know what is "beyond."

Throughout history there have been those who have made it their study to make attempts to find out what lies in that great beyond. Right after the Flood, the people built themselves a high tower which they called the "gate of the gods," which translated to "Babel," later called Babylon. Ancient Babylonian priests styled themselves "bridge-makers," giving out the idea that they were the link between the "here" and the "hereafter."

Recently there was a group here in North County that called themselves "Heaven's Gate," a term chosen to describe what they hoped was the means of getting to the "other side." When I was young there was a musical group which incorporated that idea in the name of their band. "What is it," they asked, "that separates you from 'here' to 'there'?" It's that mystical door, and so that's what they called themselves, the Doors.

These ideas are not new; people have always wanted to know more, to penetrate that invisible barrier to the unknown. Throughout history, God's people have been challenged by the temptation to engage in those methods of seeking knowledge embraced by their pagan neighbors, in their attempt to learn more than what reality presents or what God reveals. In the religions of the Old Testament, there were a myriad of rites and ceremonies practiced, including the reading of goat's livers, the deciphering of scattered arrows and others we'll talk about later, besides the spiritualistic mediums and holders of séances, fortune tellers, and so on, that were all attempts to gain knowledge from the great beyond. Today's society is saturated with the very same concepts. The occult, the practice of witchcraft and blatant spiritualism are more popular than ever.

Fifty years ago a few "innocent" comedies introduced such ideas, such as "Topper," "Bewitched," and "I Dream Of Jeannie." Everyone laughed at the jokes conveyed in these programs. Now these ideas, and that subculture have matured to programming such as "Witchblade," "The Blair Witch Project," "X-Files," "Sabrina The Teenage Witch," "Buffy the Vampire Slayer," "Charmed," "Medium," and so on. How many of the programs on

television have the occult as their theme or some type of meddling with the supernatural. Without shame or hesitation these concepts are peddled as being perfectly normal and safe. Parents think nothing of allowing their children to read Harry Potter books and the like.

For the Christian, these are recognized as being dangerous and not to be tampered with. The strongest warnings in the Bible are pronounced against those who dabble in any kind of spiritism, witchcraft or magic, and those warnings are just as appropriate today as they were back then. Someone might say, "I watch those programs, but I don't believe in spiritism." That reminds of someone famous who was questioned whether he had ever smoked marijuana. He replied, "Well, I may have smoked it, but I didn't inhale."

"Why did God pronounce these strong warnings?" you might ask. Think of it this way. There is a curtain that separates from the here and the hereafter. Our vision is limited. But God in His mercy has revealed information for His children to satisfy their natural curiosity as well as confirm their faith. "The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but those things which are revealed belong to us and to our children forever." Deuteronomy 29:29.

He only asks that we not try to go beyond the information He has given and seek additional information through these other questionable avenues, because He knows that **Satan has access through those other channels**, and that the overall influence of getting "wisdom" through those other means is not one which leads to God but away from Him.

The horoscope, the zodiac, the study of the stars, these were all old in Daniel's day, and God allowed His people to be taken captive to the very source of those ideas. The Babylon to which the captive Jews were taken was built on the very footings of the ancient tower of Babel, and those false ideas of how to obtain outside information filled the very atmosphere of the Babylon to which Daniel and his friends were taken.

And so, in that context, God demonstrated through the visions contained in this book, that He is the ultimate source of wisdom. He, the omniscient God, knows what the future holds, and is willing to reveal that part of it which He deems appropriate for His children to know, to cause their faith to grow and to satisfy their curiosity about what lies ahead, and to be willing to trust Him for the answers concerning those questions that still remain. God would not have His children attempting to find answers from these other sources. If it's important for us to know, He has revealed it. If it's not, then that's where faith comes into play. Periodically through this book of Daniel we'll see a confrontation between human sources of wisdom and God's wisdom, and God's wisdom is going to come out on top every time. **God knows.**

A second theme which runs through this book is **God cares.** God is not only omniscient; God is love. Only a Deity Who loved would pull aside the curtain and reveal the truth about the future so that His children could rest in the confidence of these things; that He knows; He's in control and He rewards. He didn't have to reveal these things; He could have said, "You'll have to trust Me about all this." But instead, in love, He revealed the path that the course of human history would take.

Like someone giving you directions to their house and providing way marks so that you would know that you were on the right track and getting closer, because He cares, God planted specific signs on the highway of time, to let us know where we're going, and that we're getting nearer to the end of the journey. We'll see *God caring* for Daniel and his friends as they enter Babylon; we'll see *God caring* for Daniel and his friends when their lives are threatened because the king is frustrated in not being able to recall a dream. We'll see that *God cares* about the three friends as they face a fiery furnace, and so on.

A third theme we'll discover is that God is in control and is involved. Though the human despots and tyrants might not

perceive it nor confess it, His hand guides the rudder of human affairs. Does this mean that God is responsible for the atrocities of these wicked rulers, the Hitlers of History? Absolutely not! The freedom of choice must be given room to operate. The plant of sin must be allowed to grow, leaf out and produce its evil, violent fruit.

Nevertheless, there is a God on the throne Who oversees it all, Who is never taken by surprise and does not allow anything to take place for which His grace can't make allowance. Contrary to the way most people believed back then and now, God is involved in the workings of the nations as well as the affairs of individuals. He steers the stars and knows the hairs of our heads.

The last theme we'll notice is that **God rewards**. In the stories and prophecies, we'll see that it pays to be faithful. God's team is the winning team, and you want to be a member of it. Jesus invites us to participate in His victory and receive the winner's share. The Bible makes no apologies for holding out as an inducement the reward of the crown of life. There is no reason why every Christian should not eagerly look forward to the grand climax of human events and the return of our Lord. It's not enough to believe that God exists, that He knows and controls. We must also know Him as a gracious Being and accept Him as the loving Deity that He is, Whose joy it will be to welcome into the heavenly home.

And most importantly of all, studying this book will give us confidence that these same four principles are at work in our lives. We'll come to believe that **God knows us** that **God cares for us**, that He wants to be **involved in our lives**, and that **He will reward us**. All of these blessings can be ours, as we take a closer look at the book of Daniel.

I hope you share my excitement as we begin this journey through the Book of Daniel. I want to invite you to read the book of Daniel at least once each week during the time of our study. If you do, by the time we will have finished our study, you will know

what the book of Daniel is about. Will you do that? You will be greatly blessed if you do!