

1. Week 31: The Remnant of God in the World: Daniel

2. Recap & Preparing for CG:

Daily Reading for Week:

- Esther 6-10, Psalm 54
- Daniel 1-3, Psalm 55
- Daniel 4-6, Psalm 56
- Daniel 7-9, Psalm 57
- Daniel 10-12, Psalm 58
- Haggai 1-2, Psalm 59
- Zechariah 1-4, Psalm 60

Resources for Week:

- Read Scripture Video: Daniel
- Read Daniel 7

3. Focus of our time together:

To participate in an intense study on how to begin reading Jewish apocalyptic literature and to practice these hermeneutic skills together by taking a careful look at Daniel 7.

4. Weekly ground rule / goal / value:

Goal: Our goal this week is to practice intellectual humility by laying our ideas and presuppositions aside for a bit in order to explore truth in interdependent community. Participate in discussion with an intent to assist in the group's shared exploration rather than either refusing to participate or trying to coerce the group to see things your way.

5. Connection and Unity Exercise (Mutual Invitation, 15 minutes):

Share your highs and lows from the week.

6. Opening Prayer: (10 minutes)

Sit silently for three minutes. As you do, listen for any thoughts or pictures or ideas that go through your mind that may be inspired by the Holy Spirit. After this silent prayer, take a couple minutes to invite one another to share anything they may have heard.

Then read this prayer aloud:

Lord, grant us pure hearts and clear minds;
Direct us in discerning what is good and true and beautiful;
Guide us along the path of wisdom and lead us in the way of humility;
We are frail and fallible creatures;
Be near to us, Lord;
Amen.

7. Intro to Discussion: (3 minutes)

This week's material is an intense study on the hermeneutics of apocalyptic literature using Daniel 7 as our focus. It is perhaps the most rigorous study of the year. We chose to structure the material this way because we didn't feel it would be faithful to the goal of YOBL or the book of Daniel to skip the hermeneutic work necessary to grow in our Bible-reading skills. Accordingly, there will be more content to digest than usual. Because of this, we've changed the normal structure to make the content more digestible. There will also be no structured small group time. Focus your energy on reading and understanding the ideas presented. Then, honestly process your emotional responses to your past and current interactions with apocalyptic literature and the variety of interpretations in the church.

8. Questions for Large Group Discussion (65 minutes):

Questions for Basic Understanding

These questions are to help us interpret and understand the text as it was intended to be interpreted and understood.

Read:

The Book of Daniel in Context

Last week, we began our final series on Old Testament books called “The Remnant of God in the World,” chronicling the final chapters in the Old Testament story about God’s plan to heal the world through His people Israel. In Ezra and Nehemiah, we read historical sketches of the first Jewish exiles who returned to Jerusalem to start over again by rebuilding the Temple, relearning the Torah, and reconstructing the city walls. We saw this exciting moment of liberation turn anticlimactic as division and turmoil broke out among those trying to be God’s renewed people in Jerusalem. Before long, the same evil and idolatry that led to the punishment of exile in the first place resurfaced, begging the questions: Is exile really over? Has this surviving remnant of the people of God truly been purged and purified of anything? Where do we go from here?

Interestingly, the book of Daniel serves as dual bookends to Ezra and Nehemiah, acting as both preface and conclusion to the return-to-Jerusalem story. In Daniel 5 and 6, we read how Daniel’s skilled and faithful work as a government official combined with his great spiritual wisdom and divine connection to the Jewish God earned him honor with the Babylonian rulers Nebuchadnezzar and Belshazzar as well as the other kings who eventually overthrew Babylon. Following the “writing on the wall” events of chapter 5, the Babylonian empire was conquered by what is called the Median-Persian Empire. King Darius the Mede, now ruling over the land, was so moved by Daniel’s divine vindication and protection in the lion’s den that he actually endorsed Judaism throughout the empire. Chapter 6 concludes with: “So Daniel prospered during the reign of Darius and the reign of Cyrus the Persian.” When Ezra 1:1 says that “The Lord moved the heart of Cyrus king of Persia to make a proclamation throughout his realm [releasing Jews to go home and build the Temple],” it is fair to say that Daniel was the primary vessel God used to do so. In other words, Daniel’s faithful witness within the Babylonian government was one of the central causes for the release of the Jews from exile. The great restart recorded in Ezra-Nehemiah was only possible because of him.

But also, the book of Daniel serves as a concluding synopsis to Ezra-Nehemiah that at least partially answers the questions raised about whether the exile was truly over and how then God’s people would live. Remember that in Jeremiah 29:10, Jeremiah recorded a promise from God to release Israel from exile after seventy years. The return to rebuild the Temple seemed to mark the end of this punishment and the beginning of the promised liberation. Daniel was hopeful for this too: “In the first year of Darius son of Xerxes (a Mede by descent), who was made ruler over the Babylonian kingdom — in the first year of his reign, I, Daniel, understood from the Scriptures, according to the word of the Lord given to Jeremiah the prophet, that the desolation of Jerusalem would last seventy years” (Dan 9:1-2). Therefore, Daniel becomes hopeful that he may indeed

live to see the end of exile and goes to bring about God's promised action by confessing on behalf of Israel. This leads to a shocking and disheartening word from God:

"While I was still in prayer, Gabriel, the man I had seen in the earlier vision, came to me... He instructed me and said to me, 'Daniel, I have now come to give you insight and understanding. As soon as you began to pray, a word went out, which I have come to tell you, for you are highly esteemed. Therefore, consider the word and understand the vision:

"Seventy 'sevens' are decreed for your people and your holy city to restrain transgression, to put an end to sin, to atone for wickedness, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal up vision and prophecy and to anoint the Most Holy Place." (Daniel 9:21-24, abbreviated)

In other words, what Ezra-Nehemiah chronicled in story form, Daniel documents in a divine vision-message: The seventy years of exile haven't accomplished their purpose — Israel hasn't been purified of its sinful nature and is not yet ready to be the holy people of God who bring "everlasting righteousness" to the world. The seventy years of exile didn't accomplish all that needs to be accomplished, and therefore exile will continue. Rather than just 70 years, Israel will experience various forms of oppression and persecution for seven times that, or roughly 490 years. This heartbreaking notion proves true over the next several hundred years of Israel's history leading to Christ: First, as we saw, the Median-Persian Empire takes over, then Alexander the Great and the Greeks, then the Syrian/Seleucid Empire, and finally Rome. For five centuries following the return of the exiles to Jerusalem, life for the Old Testament people of God is a form of continued political punishment. Exile repeats itself over and over. This historical reality is, not coincidentally, both why Daniel was written and also why it was written the way that it was.

Note that the overall book was written *about* Daniel, but not *by* Daniel. Though it contains his writings, the writings are pieced together and narrated by someone who refers to Daniel in the third person. Many scholars think that the book was either written or newly annotated around 160 BC, several generations after the first remnant returned to Israel. During this time, the Jews suffered yet another horrendous persecution, this time under Antiochus and the Syrian (or Seleucid) Empire. It is likely that these circumstances of exile, similar to Daniel's in Babylon, were the motivation for converting the old oral testimony of Daniel's faithful obedience into the more artistic and formalized literary book we have today. This book, with its hopeful (though cryptic) visions of God's eventual victory over the violent beasts of world empires and the heroic example of

Daniel's faithfulness, would have been a tremendously valuable resource for another generation of oppressed Jews. In this sense, the historical testimony of Daniel's life and visions which occurred around 580-520 BC were able to speak powerfully to God's people in later eras of violent oppression, both in the 2nd century BC under the Syrian Empire as well as in Jesus' day under the brutal Roman regime. This is, in large part, what made the Book of Daniel one of the most popular literary texts in Jesus' own day as well as one of the texts most widely referenced in the New Testament.

Ask:

How does hearing the context for Daniel help in your understanding of Ezra and Nehemiah?

Read:

The Book of Daniel as Apocalyptic Literature

The literary context that inspired the book of Daniel was the social/political landscape of God's people centuries after Daniel's life in Babylon. The landscape of persecution under brutal Syrian rule was eerily similar to the earlier torment of Babylonian oppression. It is this *similarity* of situations, not the exact details of each historical period, that inspired the form and content of Daniel, especially the seemingly strange visions in chapters 7-12. This differentiation will be crucial as we dive into exploring these texts.

Before we do, however, we must introduce a term: *Apocalyptic*. We use the term apocalyptic to mean pertaining to the end of the world — an apocalypse (typically where everything somehow explodes). But *apocalyptic*, or *apocalypticism*, is also a noun labeling a literary genre that became quite common in the ancient and Biblical world. Examples of Biblical apocalyptic include Daniel 7-12, Revelation, parts of Isaiah, and Ezekiel's visions of the flying, flaming chariot made of heavenly creatures depicting God's glory.

These texts strike us as absurd, nonsensical, and even scary. However, the ancient readers to whom these words were written would have felt no such discomfort. They would have been familiar with the symbolism and imagery in a way that would be hard for us to believe. It's worth it, therefore, to state a truism: We are utterly illiterate at reading apocalyptic literature and stand before these texts at a tremendous disadvantage. They require more homework and hermeneutic effort than perhaps any other books of the Bible. In terms of reading through the Bible in order to become more

Biblically literate, the apocalyptic texts are like the big bad bosses at the end of a video game. Indeed, scholar Aaron Chalmers dubs apocalyptic “prophecy on steroids.” It is perhaps apt then that they are mostly found toward the end of the Old and New Testaments. In fact, throughout history, more corrosive ideas and evil actions have stemmed from misreadings of apocalyptic literature than from probably any other.

The term *apocalyptic* comes from the Greek word *apokalypsis* which means to reveal or unveil knowledge that was previously hidden. Apocalyptic is symbolic picture-language, almost like political cartoons, that serve to speak both to current realities and to universal *types*. Specifically, such language was often used to speak simultaneously to various details of real-life present circumstances as well as to elevate the meaning of such things *above* those particular details to illustrate what is *typological* or *paradigmatic*. In other words, apocalyptic isn’t mostly concerned with symbolically predicting specific future events but with illustrating paradigms that tend to repeat themselves throughout history. Typically written in the context of crisis, Biblical apocalyptic aims to encourage hope in its hearers by lifting their countenance above the daunting realities of their current struggle and to illustrate the ways in which God is sovereign and powerful over even the worst the world has to offer. Apocalyptic aims to visually depict to oppressed people the truth that even the worst oppression is not the end of the story.

Consider the following snippets from Aaron Chalmers’ *Interpreting the Prophets* to help orient us toward this unfamiliar genre:

“Whereas the prophets usually envisage God acting in salvation or judgment within history, these passages seem to anticipate a climactic and decisive intervention of God that brings history (at least as we know it) to a definitive culminating point... Apocalyptic entails the revelatory communication of heavenly secrets by an other-worldly being to a seer who presents the visions in a narrative framework; the visions guide readers into a transcendent reality that takes precedence over the current situation and encourages readers to persevere in the midst of their trials. The visions reverse normal experience by making the heavenly mysteries the real world and depicting the present crisis as a temporary, illusory situation. This is achieved via God’s transforming the world for the faithful...

In apocalyptic, God reveals his previously hidden future plans usually through dreams or visions. Unlike the visions we find in the prophets, however, these are full of elaborate and, at times, strange and mysterious symbolism and/or numbers. Many of the dominant images of apocalyptic belong to the realm of fantasy or myth, or we

encounter surreal, unnatural combinations. For example, Daniel 7 contains a vision of four great beasts, including a bear with tusks in its mouth and a lion with eagle's wings, coming out of the sea, while Daniel 8 describes a goat with a horn that grows as high as the host of heaven. The meaning and significance of these dreams and visions is thus often obscure; serious interpretive work is required...

It primarily served to encourage its readers in the midst of their trials. Apocalyptic literature, like prophecy, is highly situational — it was written in order to address and respond to a specific problem in the life of the community of faith. This situation was usually one of crisis, such as rapid, destabilizing change, a severe drought or plague, or persecution.

For example, critical scholars often associate the book of Daniel (or at least chapters 7-12) with the crisis precipitated by the persecution of the Jews undertaken by Antiochus IV Epiphanes during the early second century BC. The book can be read as a commentary on the dramatic and distressing events that occurred in Israel and the broader world during his reign, which included the desecration of the Jerusalem Temple, the outlawing of distinctive Jewish rites, and the execution of those who opposed him. Daniel 7:25 appears to allude to Antiochus with its reference to the little horn 'speaking words against the Most High, wearing out the holy ones of the Most High, attempting to change the sacred seasons and the law.'

Apocalyptic seeks to encourage, comfort, and exhort the community to continued faithfulness, in spite of whatever opposition or problems its members may be facing. It affirms that such crises are only temporary — God remains in control and he will soon act to judge the wicked and vindicate the righteous."

Ask:

1. How would you describe the way you were previously taught to think about apocalyptic literature? How does the idea that apocalyptic literature is not primarily concerned with end times prophecies but symbolism regarding contemporaneous political events alter this viewpoint?
2. Have you ever felt embarrassed or uncomfortable about Biblical texts like Daniel or Revelation or Christian ideologies concerning the "rapture" or "antichrist"? Share any stories or reflections.

Read:

Beginning to Interpret Apocalyptic Literature

More from Chalmers:

“Apocalyptic texts present unique challenges to the modern interpreter. ‘No other genre of the Bible has been so fervently read with such depressing results.’ Our problems are largely a result of the fact that the apocalyptic genre has no real modern equivalent...

Impressionistic art can serve as a helpful analogy for orienting our reading of apocalyptic texts. An impressionistic painting is best appreciated from a distance. These works are composed of fine lines, dabs of paint and brush strokes that ‘combine to depict scenes of unusual vividness and emotion’. If we stand too close, however, if we concentrate simply on the lines and dabs themselves, we are unlikely to grasp what the artist intended to convey - all we will end up seeing are lines, dabs, and strokes which look rather peculiar and random in their placement. Instead, we need to take a step back and consider the work in its entirety. When we do this, we are able to appreciate how those apparently random and disjointed paint strokes, dabs and lines in fact end up working together to produce a coherent and striking whole.

Likewise, apocalyptic texts need to be appreciated from a distance. When reading apocalyptic texts, it is worth stepping back and trying to grasp the point of the vision as a whole. What is the overall effect? What is the big picture? What is the overarching sweep of the vision or narrative? Ultimately, we need to move beyond the details to determine the primary message(s) of the entire vision. The ever-present risk is that modern readers will get so bogged down in the details of the visions that they fail to grasp the bigger picture. Or, to draw another analogy, they will see the trees but miss the forest. Individual details may be important (after all, the only reason we have a bigger picture is because it is made up of smaller details), or they may not. What is always important, however, is the significance of the vision as a whole. And, of course, it is often when we have grasped the big picture that the details within this make more sense.

Once we have grasped the big picture of the vision, it is time to focus on the details. The further we move from the general (the ‘big picture’) to the specific (‘details’), the less certain our interpretations may become. In other words, while we may be confident that we have grasped the meaning of the vision as a whole, the significance of certain specific elements within this may elude us. ‘This is not unexpected, given the allusive nature of apocalyptic visions. For much of the vision is an earthly way to think about a

heavenly reality, or a present way to think about a future reality. So given our earthly and present limitations, we cannot expect to understand the meaning of each detail.”

Ask:

Describe a moment when you’ve experienced something like impressionistic art where choosing not to focus too much on specific details helped you to better see and appreciate the overall picture.

Read: Daniel 7. As you do, keep in mind the analogy of impressionist art and focus on the big picture being painted with these images and symbols.

Ask:

1. What big-picture impression stood out in your mind as you read Daniel 7? In other words, what point is it trying to make?
2. In your mind, how important is a text like Daniel 7 to your life as a Christ-follower?
3. How does it make you feel to meditate on the fact that our entire faith tradition is so heavily dependent on a *book*, and specifically an old book that most Christians and perhaps we ourselves struggle (and often fail) to read correctly?

9. Questions for Small Group Discussion:

There will be no small group discussion this week.

10. Closing (5 minutes):

Spend a minute in silence, discerning any invitations the Holy Spirit may have for you — whether to dive deeper into the study of Daniel and apocalyptic on your own, to take a break from YOBL, or to make some commitment based on what you heard in the text. Make any commitments to God in prayer before one another.