THE BOOK OF DANIEL

The King on the Clouds

Daniel, Unfiltered

For teens who think they've heard it all

BILL McLEOD

Papa Bill Books

THE OLD TESTAMENT FOR TEENS

The King on the Clouds: The Book of Daniel, Unfiltered

Part of The Old Testament for Teens series.

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In the author's own text, pronouns referring to God the Father, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit are capitalized for reverence. Scripture quotations follow the WEB Protestant Edition exactly, including its capitalization.

AI Disclosure. This book was written by Bill McLeod with the assistance of artificial intelligence tools for drafting, research, and editing. All content was reviewed and approved by the author, who takes full responsibility for it. Readers are encouraged to open the Scriptures and study them for themselves.

A WORD TO THE READER

Before You Start

You probably know at least one story from Daniel. Maybe it's the lions' den. Maybe it's three guys in a blazing furnace. Maybe it's a mysterious hand writing on a wall. They're some of the most famous stories in the Bible, and they show up in kids' Bibles, cartoons, and Sunday school felt boards everywhere.

But here's something a lot of people miss: when Daniel's story begins, he and his three best friends are teenagers. Probably around fourteen to sixteen. They were ripped away from their families, marched hundreds of miles to a foreign empire, given new names, enrolled in a pagan university, and pressured to fit in. Everything about Babylon was designed to make them forget who they were and whose they were.

They didn't forget. And the way they stayed faithful, respectfully, courageously, and wisely, is one of the best guides you'll ever find for living out your faith in a world that doesn't share it.

Then the second half of Daniel shifts into wild visions of beasts, horns, angels, and a mysterious figure coming on the clouds. It's some of the most debated writing in Scripture. But its message is simple: empires rise and fall, and God's kingdom lasts forever.

Let's go.

How This Book Works

This book walks through Daniel in seven chapters: new names and the same faith (Daniel 1), the giant statue and the uncut stone (2),

the fiery furnace (3), a humbled king and the writing on the wall (4-5), the lions' den (6), four beasts and the Son of Man (7-8), and prayer, seventy weeks, and shining like stars (9-12).

Before chapter 1, a section called Setting the Scene explains who Daniel and his friends were, how the book is organized, why part of it is written in a different language, and how scholars date it. Read it first.

Each chapter ends with a Key Verse quoted word for word from the World English Bible (WEB), Protestant Edition, a public-domain modern translation used for every Scripture quotation in this book (Scripture is quoted exactly as the WEB prints it; in the rest of the book, pronouns for God are capitalized out of reverence); Real Talk questions to think through alone or talk over with someone you trust; and a Try This challenge.

On questions where sincere Christians disagree, such as when Daniel was written or how to understand the Seventy Weeks, I'll lay out the main views fairly and leave the decision to you, your family, and your church. This book quotes Daniel in places and explains it mostly in my own words, so keep a Bible open next to it. Don't take my word for it. Take His.

FOR THE ADULTS

A Note for Parents and Youth Leaders

Thank you for putting this book in a teenager's hands. It's the twenty-seventh book in The Old Testament for Teens, a companion to the New Testament for Teens series, written for readers who can smell a sermon coming a mile away. I've tried to write honestly, directly, and with real respect for what these readers can handle.

Daniel is uniquely suited to teenagers. Its heroes were teenagers when the story began, facing intense pressure to conform in a culture that didn't share their faith. This book highlights the respectful, wise, and courageous way they stayed faithful, without encouraging needless defiance of authority or self-righteousness.

The book explains the structure of Daniel: stories in chapters 1-6 and apocalyptic visions in chapters 7-12, along with the Aramaic section in 2:4-7:28. It briefly and fairly presents the main views on when Daniel was written, and on how to interpret the visions, including the Seventy Weeks of Daniel 9, without pushing any single chart or timeline.

Real Talk boxes address peer pressure, identity, praying with friends, anxiety about the future, pride, faithful habits, standing up for your faith respectfully, and fear about the end times. Where relevant, readers are encouraged to talk with a trusted adult, and 988, the Suicide and Crisis Lifeline, is listed for anyone feeling overwhelmed.

The closing section, Where This Points, shows how Jesus took Daniel's title Son of Man as His own, declared before the high priest that He was the one who would come with the clouds, and established the everlasting kingdom Daniel foresaw. Wherever Scripture is quoted directly, the wording is from the World English Bible (WEB), Protestant Edition, a public-domain translation.

My prayer is that every reader will stay faithful wherever they are planted, and trust that the Most High rules.

Grace and peace,

Bill McLeod

Papa Bill Books

BEFORE YOU OPEN THE BOOK

Setting the Scene

Teenagers in Babylon

In 605 BC, Nebuchadnezzar, the young crown prince and soon king of Babylon, defeated Egypt at the battle of Carchemish and took control of Judah. He carried off some of the best and brightest young people from Jerusalem's royal and noble families to serve in his court. Among them were Daniel and his three friends, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. The Hebrew word used for them means youths, and ancient sources suggest that students were trained for royal service from around age fourteen. So Daniel and his friends were probably fourteen to sixteen years old. That's eight years before Ezekiel was taken to Babylon, and nineteen years before Jerusalem was destroyed.

Two Halves

Daniel has two very different halves. Chapters 1-6 are stories about Daniel and his friends living faithfully under foreign kings, told mostly in the third person. Chapters 7-12 are visions that Daniel saw, told mostly in the first person, using vivid symbols like beasts, horns, and angels. This kind of writing is called apocalyptic, from a Greek word meaning revealing or unveiling. The stories show how to live faithfully in exile. The visions show why: because God rules history, and His kingdom will outlast every empire.

A Book in Two Languages

Most of the Old Testament is written in Hebrew. But Daniel switches languages in the middle of chapter 2, verse 4, when the Babylonian wise men speak to the king. From there until the end of chapter 7, the book is written in Aramaic, the international language of the Babylonian and Persian empires. Then it switches back to Hebrew for chapters 8-12. The Aramaic section focuses on God's rule over the nations, so it fits that it's written in the language of the nations. The overlap means the two halves of the book are woven together.

When Was It Written?

Christians hold different views on when Daniel was written. The traditional view, held by many Christians and Jews, is that Daniel himself or someone close to him wrote it in the sixth century BC, and that its visions predict events centuries ahead. Many scholars think the book reached its final form around 165 BC, during the persecution of Jews by the Greek king Antiochus IV, using older stories about Daniel to encourage people suffering in that crisis. Others hold positions between these. Reasons given include the book's languages, historical details, and its detailed prophecies in chapter 11. Sincere Christians hold different views on this. Either way, Jesus treated Daniel as Scripture and called him a prophet.

Where Daniel Sits

In Christian Bibles, Daniel is placed with the major prophets, after Ezekiel. In the Hebrew Bible, it's in the section called the Writings, along with books like Psalms and Esther. Some think that's because Daniel served as a government official rather than a prophet who preached to Israel. Either way, Daniel's influence is huge. The New

Testament draws heavily on it, especially the book of Revelation and Jesus' own words about the Son of Man.

The Map

Chapter 1 (Daniel 1): New names, same faith.

Chapter 2 (Daniel 2): The giant statue and the uncut stone.

Chapter 3 (Daniel 3): The fiery furnace.

Chapter 4 (Daniel 4-5): A humbled king and the writing on the wall.

Chapter 5 (Daniel 6): The lions' den.

Chapter 6 (Daniel 7-8): Four beasts and the Son of Man.

Chapter 7 (Daniel 9-12): Prayer, seventy weeks, and shining like stars.

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CHAPTER 1

New Names, Same Faith

Daniel 1

Picture this. You're fifteen. An enemy army has surrounded your city. Your king has surrendered. And soldiers come to your house and take you away, along with other teenagers from the best families in town. You're marched about five hundred miles across the desert to the most powerful city on earth. You may never see your parents again.

That's how Daniel's story begins. "In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it." Nebuchadnezzar took some of the sacred vessels from God's temple and put them in the treasure house of his own god. It looked like Babylon's gods had won.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Babylon**

Babylon was the capital of the Neo-Babylonian Empire, on the Euphrates River in what is now Iraq. Under Nebuchadnezzar, it became one of the most magnificent cities in the ancient world. It had massive double walls, a grand processional road, the famous blue-glazed Ishtar Gate decorated with lions and dragons, and enormous temples. Ancient writers later described its Hanging Gardens as one of the Seven Wonders of the World, though archaeologists still debate where they were. For a teenager from Jerusalem, arriving in Babylon must have felt like walking into the biggest, flashiest, most overwhelming city imaginable.

Nebuchadnezzar had a plan. He ordered his chief official, Ashpenaz, to select young men from Israel's royal family and nobility, "youths in whom was no defect, but well-favored, skillful in all wisdom, endowed with knowledge, understanding science." They would be trained for three years in "the learning and the language of the Chaldeans," and then serve in the king's court.

It was a smart strategy. Take the brightest young people from conquered nations, give them the best education, and turn them into loyal Babylonians. Within a generation, they'd forget where they came from.

The first step was new names. "The prince of the eunuchs gave names to them: to Daniel he gave the name Belteshazzar; to Hananiah, Shadrach; to Mishael, Meshach; and to Azariah, Abednego."

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **What's in a Name?**
>
> The friends' Hebrew names all honored the God of Israel. Daniel means God is my judge. Hananiah means the LORD is gracious. Mishael means Who is like God? Azariah means the LORD has helped. Their new Babylonian names honored Babylonian gods instead. Belteshazzar probably meant something like Bel, protect his life. Abednego meant servant of Nebo, another Babylonian god. Shadrach and Meshach are harder to pin down, but they may have been connected to Babylonian gods too. Changing their names was a way of changing their identity, telling them they belonged to Babylon now.

Notice what Daniel and his friends didn't do. They didn't refuse their new names. They didn't refuse to learn the Babylonian language, literature, and science, even though some of it was full of Babylonian religion. They studied hard, and they excelled. They lived in Babylon and served it well.

But they drew a line somewhere. “But Daniel purposed in his heart that he would not defile himself with the king’s delicacies, nor with the wine which he drank.”

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Fair Questions: Why the Food?**
>
> Why would Daniel draw his line at the king’s food? Scholars suggest several reasons. Some of the food may not have been kosher under the law of Moses, like pork or meat that wasn’t properly drained of blood. Some of it may have been offered to Babylonian gods first. Others suggest that eating from the king’s table created a bond of loyalty and dependence on the king that Daniel wanted to avoid. Still others note that choosing simple food was a way for Daniel to keep his identity and remember that his life came from God, not from Nebuchadnezzar. The text doesn’t say exactly, and these reasons may overlap. What’s clear is that Daniel decided ahead of time where his convictions were.

Notice the phrase purposed in his heart. Daniel made up his mind before the pressure came. He didn’t wait until the food was in front of him to decide what to do. He knew who he was and what he believed.

> **REAL TALK** **Decide Before the Pressure Hits**
>
> Some of the hardest choices you’ll face will come suddenly: at a party, in a group chat, in the back seat of a car, or when a friend asks you to do something you know is wrong. In those moments, it’s really hard to think clearly. That’s why it helps to decide ahead of time. What will you do if someone offers you a vape, drugs, or alcohol? What will you do if a conversation online starts heading somewhere unsafe? What will you do if your friends start bullying someone? Like Daniel, you can purpose in your heart now. Then, when the pressure comes, you’re not deciding. You’re just following through.

Here’s the part that makes Daniel’s courage so wise. He didn’t march into the dining hall and throw his plate on the floor. He

didn't lecture the Babylonians about how sinful they were. He went to the official in charge and asked permission respectfully.

The official was nervous. If Daniel and his friends looked worse than the others, the king might have his head. So Daniel proposed a test. "Test your servants, I beg you, ten days; and let them give us vegetables to eat and water to drink." Then compare them with the others, and decide.

BACKGROUND CHECK **God Gave Favor**

The text says, "God made Daniel find kindness and compassion in the sight of the prince of the eunuchs." Daniel's respectful request worked partly because God was at work behind the scenes. The official liked Daniel. That's a reminder that God can open doors through relationships. Daniel had obviously treated this man with respect, and the man returned it. Kindness and respect often open more doors than arguments.

At the end of ten days, Daniel and his friends looked healthier and better nourished than all the young men who ate the king's food. So the official let them keep eating vegetables.

REAL TALK **Respectful Courage**

Daniel shows that standing firm in your faith doesn't mean being rude, self-righteous, or disrespectful. He was polite. He offered a creative solution. He was willing to work within the system where he could. And he didn't judge the other students. If your faith ever puts you at odds with a teacher, coach, or friend, you can follow Daniel's example. Be humble. Ask respectfully. Look for a solution that honors God and respects the other person. You might be surprised how often people say yes. And when they don't, you can still respond with kindness.

REAL TALK **This Isn't a Diet Plan**

Some people have turned Daniel 1 into a diet, sometimes called the Daniel Fast. Choosing simple food for a time of prayer can be a good spiritual

practice for some people. But Daniel 1 isn't mainly about food rules, weight loss, or looking a certain way. It's about loyalty to God. If you're struggling with how you think about food, your body, or eating, please talk to a parent, school counselor, or doctor. Eating disorders are serious, and help is available. God cares about your whole health, not just what's on your plate.

God blessed the four friends. "Now as for these four youths, God gave them knowledge and skill in all learning and wisdom; and Daniel had understanding in all visions and dreams." When the three years were up, the king interviewed all the graduates. No one compared to Daniel and his friends. The king found them "ten times better than all the magicians and enchanters who were in all his realm."

The chapter ends with a quiet line that covers a whole lifetime. "Daniel continued even to the first year of King Cyrus." That's about seventy years later. Daniel outlasted Nebuchadnezzar. He outlasted the Babylonian Empire. He was still faithful when the Persians took over. The teenager who drew a line about food became an old man who never stopped following God.

Notice, too, that Daniel's faithfulness didn't make him weird or useless. It made him excellent. He didn't have to choose between loving God and doing well in school. He did both. Some people think following God means pulling away from everything in the culture. Others think it means blending in completely. Daniel found a third way: engage the world wholeheartedly, serve it with excellence, and stay loyal to God where it counts most.

REAL TALK **Who Are You, Really?**

Babylon tried to change Daniel's name, his language, his education, and his diet, all to change his identity. Today, the pressure to change who you are comes from everywhere: social media, advertising, friends, and culture. It can

tell you you're only worth something if you look a certain way, own certain things, or get enough likes. Daniel knew his identity came from God, not from Babylon. Whatever names people call you, whatever labels they put on you, God knows your real name. You belong to Him.

REAL TALK **Far From Home**

Daniel and his friends were separated from their families as teenagers, and they never went back. Some teens today know what it's like to be far from home: kids in foster care, refugees, students whose parents are deployed, or teens whose families have been split apart. If that's you, your feelings of loss, loneliness, or anger are real. Daniel's story shows that God goes with you to unfamiliar places. It also shows the value of friends who share your faith. If you're struggling, please talk to a trusted adult, a school counselor, or a pastor. You don't have to figure out a new place alone.

KEY VERSE

But Daniel purposed in his heart that he would not defile himself with the king's delicacies, nor with the wine which he drank. Therefore he requested of the prince of the eunuchs that he might not defile himself.

Daniel 1:8 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. What parts of Babylonian life did Daniel accept, and where did he draw the line?
2. Why do you think Daniel made up his mind ahead of time?
3. How did Daniel show respect while standing firm?
4. Where do you feel pressure to change who you are?

TRY THIS *Write down two or three convictions you want to hold firmly, and decide now how you'll respond when pressure comes. Share them with a trusted friend who can help you stay strong.*

CHAPTER 2

The Giant Statue and the Uncut Stone

Daniel 2

A few years later, King Nebuchadnezzar had a nightmare. It disturbed him so much that he couldn't sleep. So he called in all his wise men: magicians, enchanters, sorcerers, and astrologers. And he made an impossible demand.

He didn't just want them to interpret his dream. He wanted them to tell him what the dream was. And if they couldn't, he said, "you will be cut in pieces, and your houses will be made a dunghill."

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Dream Experts**
>
> In Babylon, dreams were taken very seriously. People believed the gods sent messages through them. Babylonian scholars kept huge collections of dream omens, written on clay tablets, which listed what different dream images supposedly meant. A wise man could look up the symbols and give an interpretation. But Nebuchadnezzar was too smart for that. If they could tell him the dream itself, he'd know their interpretation was real. If they couldn't, he'd know they were just making it up.

The wise men panicked. They told the king, "It is a rare thing that the king requires, and there is no other who can show it before the king except the gods, whose dwelling is not with flesh." No human

being could do this. Only the gods could, and the gods didn't live with people.

That was exactly the point Daniel was about to prove wrong.

The king was furious and ordered all the wise men of Babylon executed. Since Daniel and his friends were now part of that group, the soldiers came for them too. Daniel spoke with wisdom and tact to the commander of the guard and asked for a little time. Then he did something important.

"Then Daniel went to his house and made the thing known to Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, his companions: that they would desire mercies of the God of heaven concerning this secret."

> **REAL TALK** **Praying With Friends**
>
> When Daniel faced a life-or-death crisis, the first thing he did was gather his friends to pray. He didn't try to handle it alone. Having friends who will pray with you is one of the greatest gifts in life. It might look like a group chat where you share prayer requests, a small group at church, or just one friend you can call when things get hard. If you don't have friends like that yet, ask God to bring them into your life, and look for people at church or youth group. And be that kind of friend for someone else. James wrote, "pray for one another, that you may be healed."

That night, God revealed the secret to Daniel in a vision. And Daniel's first response wasn't to run to the king. It was to worship. "Blessed be the name of God forever and ever; for wisdom and might are his. He changes the times and the seasons. He removes kings and sets up kings. He gives wisdom to the wise, and knowledge to those who have understanding. He reveals the deep and secret things. He knows what is in the darkness, and the light dwells with him."

Then Daniel went to the king. And he made sure Nebuchadnezzar knew where the answer came from. No wise man, enchanter, or magician could do this, Daniel said, "but there is a God in heaven who reveals secrets."

REAL TALK **Giving Credit**

Daniel could have taken credit for revealing the dream. It would have made him look amazing. Instead, he pointed straight to God. When you do something well, like ace a test, win a game, or create something beautiful, it's good to enjoy it. But remember who gave you the ability. Humility isn't pretending you're bad at things. It's recognizing that every gift comes from God. Daniel's humility made his success safe, because he never forgot where it came from.

Then Daniel described the dream. The king had seen a huge, dazzling statue, terrifying to look at. "As for this image, its head was of fine gold, its chest and its arms of silver, its belly and its thighs of bronze, its legs of iron, its feet part of iron and part of clay."

Then, as the king watched, a stone was cut out, but not by human hands. It smashed into the statue's feet of iron and clay, and the whole statue crumbled. The gold, silver, bronze, iron, and clay were all broken to pieces and blew away like chaff from a threshing floor. "The stone that struck the image became a great mountain and filled the whole earth."

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Four Kingdoms**

Daniel told Nebuchadnezzar, "You are the head of gold." After Babylon would come three more kingdoms, each represented by a different metal. Many Christian interpreters identify them as Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, and Rome. Many scholars, especially those who date Daniel later, identify them as Babylon, Media, Persia, and Greece. Either way, the pattern is the same. The metals decrease in value but increase in strength, and the feet are a weak mix

> of iron and clay, a kingdom that wouldn't hold together. Every human empire, no matter how impressive, would eventually fall.

Then Daniel explained the stone. "In the days of those kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom which will never be destroyed, nor will its sovereignty be left to another people; but it will break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms, and it will stand forever."

The statue was huge, shiny, and impressive. The stone was small and plain. But the stone wasn't made by human hands. It came from God. And it didn't just defeat the statue. It grew into a mountain that filled the whole earth.

Notice something about the statue's feet. They were part iron and part clay. Iron is strong. Clay is brittle. You can't make them stick together. The most impressive statue in the world was standing on a weak foundation. Every human kingdom, no matter how glorious it looks, has feet of clay. Sooner or later, it cracks. That's not just true of empires. It's true of anything we build our lives on besides God: popularity, money, looks, or achievement. They look solid, but they won't hold.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **The Stone Cut Without Hands**
>
> Christians have long seen the stone in Daniel 2 as a picture of God's kingdom through the Messiah. Jesus described Himself as the stone the builders rejected, which became the cornerstone, quoting Psalm 118. He also said that God's kingdom starts small, like a mustard seed, and grows into a great tree. Jewish interpreters have also understood the stone as God's kingdom, often connected to the Messiah. The image teaches that God's kingdom doesn't come through human power, armies, or politics. It comes from God, and nothing can stop it.

Think about how this dream must have sounded to Nebuchadnezzar. He was the most powerful man in the world. His

empire seemed permanent. And God was telling him, through a teenager from a conquered nation, that his kingdom was temporary. Every empire after his would fall too. Only one kingdom would last, and it wouldn't be built by any king.

REAL TALK **When the World Feels Out of Control**

Sometimes the news is overwhelming: wars, elections, economic problems, disasters, and leaders you don't trust. It can make you anxious about the future. Daniel 2 is a reminder that God "removes kings and sets up kings." Every empire in Nebuchadnezzar's dream fell. God's kingdom didn't. That doesn't mean politics and current events don't matter. They do, and Christians should care about justice and the common good. But your ultimate hope isn't in any leader, party, or nation. It's in a kingdom that will never be destroyed. If worry about the future is taking over your thoughts, talk to a parent or trusted adult. You don't have to carry it alone.

Nebuchadnezzar was stunned. He fell on his face before Daniel and said, "Of a truth your God is the God of gods, and the Lord of kings, and a revealer of secrets." He promoted Daniel to rule over the whole province of Babylon and put him in charge of all the wise men. And at Daniel's request, his three friends were given important positions too.

The teenager who was dragged to Babylon was now one of the most powerful men in the empire. But he'd gotten there by praying with friends, giving God credit, and telling the truth.

REAL TALK **Using Your Gifts in Babylon**

Daniel and his friends served the king of Babylon with excellence. They didn't hide in a corner waiting to go home. They worked hard, learned well, and used their gifts to bless the people around them, even people who didn't share their faith. That's a great model for you. Your schoolwork, your job, your team, and your talents are places to serve God. Jeremiah told the exiles to

seek the peace of the city where God had sent them. You can do your best and bless others right where you are, while still keeping your loyalty to God first.

KEY VERSE

In the days of those kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom which will never be destroyed, nor will its sovereignty be left to another people; but it will break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms, and it will stand forever.

Daniel 2:44 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think Daniel asked his friends to pray with him?
2. What does Daniel's prayer in 2:20-22 say about who God is?
3. What does the statue say about human power? What does the stone say about God's kingdom?
4. Where do you need to remember that God rules over the things that worry you?

TRY THIS *Text or talk to one friend this week and ask how you can pray for them. Then actually pray for them, and check back in a few days.*

CHAPTER 3

The Fiery Furnace

Daniel 3

Remember the statue in Nebuchadnezzar's dream? The one with a head of gold? Daniel had told him, You are the head of gold. Apparently, Nebuchadnezzar liked that part a little too much.

"Nebuchadnezzar the king made an image of gold, whose height was sixty cubits and its width six cubits." That's about ninety feet tall and nine feet wide, as tall as a nine-story building. Not just a golden head this time. The whole thing was gold. It was as if the king was saying, My kingdom won't fall. It will last forever.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Plain of Dura**

Nebuchadnezzar set up his statue on the plain of Dura, somewhere in the province of Babylon. A statue that tall, out on a flat plain, would have been visible for miles, especially gleaming in the sun. It may have been made of wood or another material and covered in gold. Its proportions, ten times taller than wide, would have made it look like a tall pillar or obelisk, possibly with a figure on top. Some think it represented Nebuchadnezzar himself, others one of his gods. Either way, bowing to it meant pledging total loyalty to the king and his religion.

The king summoned all his officials from across the empire for the dedication ceremony. A herald announced the rule. When the music started, from horns, flutes, harps, and every kind of instrument, everyone had to "fall down and worship the golden

image that Nebuchadnezzar the king has set up." And the penalty for refusing? "Whoever doesn't fall down and worship shall be cast into the middle of a burning fiery furnace the same hour."

The music played. Thousands of people bowed. And three young men stayed standing.

> **REAL TALK** **Standing When Everyone Bows**
>
> Imagine being one of only three people standing in a crowd of thousands. Everyone can see you. That's what peer pressure feels like at its most intense. It might not be a golden statue for you. It might be a group that expects you to laugh at a cruel joke, share an inappropriate picture, cheat on a test, or go along with something you know is wrong. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego remind you that you don't have to do what everyone else is doing. And notice: there were three of them. Having even one or two friends who share your convictions makes standing firm a lot easier.

Where was Daniel? The text doesn't say. He may have been away on official business, or his high position may have kept him separate. Some think the story deliberately focuses on his three friends to show that they could stand firm without him.

Some officials, probably jealous of these foreign young men in high positions, went straight to the king. "There are certain Jews whom you have appointed over the affairs of the province of Babylon: Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. These men, O king, have not respected you."

Nebuchadnezzar was furious. He had the three brought before him. But surprisingly, he gave them a second chance. If they would bow when the music played, everything would be fine. If not, into the furnace. And then he added a taunt: "Who is that god who will deliver you out of my hands?"

Their answer is one of the bravest speeches in the Bible.

"Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter. If it happens, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace; and he will deliver us out of your hand, O king. But if not, let it be known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image which you have set up."

BACKGROUND CHECK **But If Not**

Those three words, But if not, are some of the most powerful in Scripture. The friends were confident God could rescue them. They even believed He would. But they didn't make their obedience depend on it. Even if God chose not to save them from the fire, they still wouldn't bow. During World War II, in 1940, when British troops were trapped at Dunkirk, a naval officer reportedly sent home a three-word message: But if not. Many people in Britain recognized the reference to Daniel 3 and understood: the situation was desperate, but they would not surrender.

REAL TALK **Faith That Doesn't Depend on Outcomes**

Some people think faith means believing God will always give you what you want. If you pray hard enough, the sick person will get better, the problem will disappear, the test will be easy. Sometimes God does answer that way. But Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego had a deeper faith. They trusted God whether He rescued them or not. That kind of faith is for the times when prayers don't get answered the way you hoped. It says: God, I know You can. I hope You will. But even if You don't, I'm still Yours. That's not weak faith. It's the strongest kind.

Nebuchadnezzar's face twisted with rage. He ordered the furnace heated "seven times more than it was usually heated." He had the three men tied up, fully dressed, and thrown in. The fire was so hot that the soldiers who threw them in were killed by the flames.

Then the king leaped to his feet in shock. "Didn't we cast three men bound into the middle of the fire?" His advisers said yes. "He answered, Look, I see four men loose, walking in the middle of the

fire, and they are unharmed. The appearance of the fourth is like a son of the gods."

Think about what the three friends experienced. They expected to die. They were tied up and thrown into a fire so hot it killed the soldiers standing at its edge. And the first thing that happened in the fire was that their ropes burned away and they found themselves walking free, with someone beside them. The very thing meant to destroy them became the place where they met God most powerfully.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Fair Questions: Who Was the Fourth Man?**
> Nebuchadnezzar said the fourth figure looked "like a son of the gods." Later, he said God "has sent his angel." Many Jewish and Christian readers have understood the fourth figure as an angel sent by God. Many Christians, since early church times, have also seen it as a preincarnate appearance of the Son of God, Jesus before He was born in Bethlehem, appearing as He seems to in a few other Old Testament scenes. Others hold both possibilities open. What everyone agrees on is the heart of it: God didn't keep His servants out of the fire, but He met them in it.

The three men weren't just alive. They were loose. The ropes had burned off, but nothing else had. They were walking around in the fire, and someone was walking with them.

Nebuchadnezzar went to the door of the furnace and called, "Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, you servants of the Most High God, come out, and come here!" They walked out. And all the officials gathered around and saw that the fire hadn't touched them. "The hair of their head wasn't singed. Their pants weren't changed. The smell of fire wasn't even on them."

BACKGROUND CHECK **Furnaces in Babylon**

Babylon used large brick kilns to fire the millions of bricks needed for its huge building projects. These furnaces may have had an opening at the top for loading and a door at the side, which would explain how Nebuchadnezzar could look in and see the men walking inside. Historical records from the ancient Near East mention burning as a punishment in some cases. Jeremiah 29 mentions two men whom the king of Babylon roasted in the fire. The threat in Daniel 3 was terrifyingly real.

REAL TALK **God in the Fire**

Isaiah wrote, "When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned, and flame will not scorch you." That doesn't mean Christians never suffer. Many faithful people throughout history have suffered and even died for their faith. But it means you're never alone in the fire. Maybe your fire is a family crisis, an illness, depression, bullying, or grief. God doesn't always take the fire away immediately. But He walks into it with you. If you're in a fire right now that feels too hot to handle, please reach out to a trusted adult. And if you ever feel like you can't go on, call or text 988 any time, day or night.

Nebuchadnezzar praised the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, "who has sent his angel and delivered his servants who trusted in him." He recognized that they had been willing to give up their lives rather than worship any god but their own. Then he made a decree that no one could speak against their God, "because there is no other god who is able to deliver like this." And he promoted the three friends.

Notice what happened. The king who demanded that everyone worship his image ended up praising the God of the three men who refused. Their faithfulness became a witness to the most powerful man on earth.

REAL TALK **When Faith Costs Something**

Most teens in many countries won't face a furnace for their faith. But faith can still cost something. You might lose a friend because you won't go along with something. You might be laughed at for praying or going to church. You might miss out on a party or an opportunity. Those costs are real, and it's okay to feel them. But Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego show that some things are worth more than comfort or popularity. And remember: they didn't stand alone. Find friends who will stand with you.

KEY VERSE

If it happens, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace; and he will deliver us out of your hand, O king. But if not, let it be known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image which you have set up.

Daniel 3:17–18 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think Nebuchadnezzar built a statue made entirely of gold?
2. What gave Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego the courage to stay standing?
3. What does But if not mean for your own faith?
4. Where do you need to know that God is with you in the fire?

TRY THIS *Write your own But if not prayer about something you're hoping for: God, I know You can… I hope You will… But if not, I will still trust You.*

CHAPTER 4

A Humbled King and the Writing on the Wall

Daniel 4–5

Chapter 4 is unusual. It's written as a letter from Nebuchadnezzar himself, addressed to all the peoples of the world. He wants to tell everyone what God did to him. And he starts with praise. "How great are his signs! How mighty are his wonders! His kingdom is an everlasting kingdom."

Then he tells the story. He was at home in his palace, comfortable and prosperous, when he had another terrifying dream. He saw an enormous tree in the middle of the earth. It reached to the sky and could be seen from the ends of the earth. Its leaves were beautiful, its fruit fed everyone, and animals and birds found shelter under it.

Then a holy messenger came down from heaven and shouted: Cut down the tree. Strip off its branches. But leave the stump and its roots in the ground, bound with iron and bronze. And then the messenger said the strangest thing: let him be wet with the dew and live with the animals, and let his mind be changed from a man's to an animal's, until seven periods of time pass. "To the intent that the living may know that the Most High rules in the kingdom of men."

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Most High Rules**

The phrase the Most High rules in the kingdom of men, or something very close to it, appears several times in Daniel 4. It's the main point of the chapter. Nebuchadnezzar thought he ruled. He had built the greatest empire of his time. But God wanted him, and everyone else, to know that every king's power is borrowed. The Most High gives kingdoms to whomever He chooses, and He can take them away. That's true of every president, prime minister, dictator, and celebrity today.

Daniel heard the dream and was troubled. He liked Nebuchadnezzar and didn't want to deliver bad news. But he told the truth. The tree was the king. He would be driven away from people and live like an animal until he acknowledged that God rules. The stump meant his kingdom would be restored once he learned that lesson.

And then Daniel gave the king some advice. "Break off your sins by righteousness, and your iniquities by showing mercy to the poor. Perhaps there may be a lengthening of your tranquility."

REAL TALK **Telling Hard Truth With Love**

Daniel had to tell the most powerful man on earth that he was about to be humbled. That took courage. But notice how he did it. He was respectful. He was obviously sad about it, wishing the dream were about the king's enemies instead. And he offered a way forward: repent and show mercy. When you have to tell a friend something hard, like that they're making a bad choice or hurting someone, you can follow Daniel's example. Speak honestly, but with kindness. Show that you care. And point toward hope.

A year passed. Nothing happened. Maybe Nebuchadnezzar thought he'd escaped. Then one day, he was walking on the roof of his royal palace, looking out over the city, and he said, "Is not this great Babylon, which I have built for the royal dwelling place by the might of my power and for the glory of my majesty?"

Notice all the I, my, and my. Before he finished speaking, a voice came from heaven. "The kingdom has departed from you." Immediately, Nebuchadnezzar lost his mind. He was driven away from people and ate grass like cattle. His body was soaked with dew, his hair grew long like eagle's feathers, and his nails like bird's claws.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Nebuchadnezzar's Bricks**

Nebuchadnezzar really did rebuild Babylon on a massive scale. Archaeologists have found millions of bricks stamped with his name. Ancient inscriptions record him boasting about his building projects in language strikingly similar to Daniel 4:30. Some scholars have also connected the story to a fragmentary text about a later Babylonian king, Nabonidus, who spent years away from Babylon in the Arabian desert. Scholars debate how these traditions relate. Some readers note that the condition described in Daniel 4 resembles a rare mental illness in which a person believes they are an animal.

Then, at the end of the appointed time, something changed. "At the end of the days I, Nebuchadnezzar, lifted up my eyes to heaven, and my understanding returned to me; and I blessed the Most High." The moment he looked up, his sanity came back. His kingdom was restored. And he finished his letter with these words: "Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and extol and honor the King of heaven; for all his works are truth, and his ways justice; and those who walk in pride he is able to abase."

REAL TALK **Looking Up**

Nebuchadnezzar's healing began when he looked up. Pride keeps us looking at ourselves: our achievements, our image, our plans. Humility starts when we look up and remember that God is God and we're not. That's not humiliating. It's freeing. You don't have to hold the whole world together or prove your worth every day. You can rest in the fact that the Most High rules.

Pride makes you exhausting to be around and exhausted to be. Humility makes room for God and for other people.

Chapter 5 jumps ahead about twenty-three years. Nebuchadnezzar is dead. Babylon is ruled by Belshazzar. And that night, the Medes and Persians are camped outside the city.

Belshazzar didn't seem worried. "Belshazzar the king made a great feast to a thousand of his lords, and drank wine before the thousand." And then, as the wine flowed, he did something shocking. He ordered the gold and silver vessels from God's temple in Jerusalem to be brought out, so he and his guests could drink from them. "They drank wine, and praised the gods of gold, and of silver, of bronze, of iron, of wood, and of stone."

REAL TALK **Treating Holy Things Lightly**

Belshazzar took cups that had been dedicated to God and used them as party props. It was a deliberate insult. Today, people can treat holy things lightly too, by mocking God, joking about faith, or using Jesus' name as a swear word. Sometimes Christians do it without thinking. Daniel 5 is a reminder that God is not a joke. That doesn't mean you can't laugh or ask hard questions. God welcomes honest questions. But it does mean treating Him, His name, and His people with respect.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Who Was Belshazzar?**

For a long time, critics said Belshazzar never existed, because ancient historians listed Nabonidus as the last king of Babylon. Then archaeologists discovered inscriptions naming Belshazzar as Nabonidus's son. Nabonidus spent about ten years away in Arabia, and he left Belshazzar in charge of Babylon as co-regent. That explains why Belshazzar offered Daniel the position of third ruler in the kingdom, after Nabonidus and himself. When Daniel calls Nebuchadnezzar Belshazzar's father, it likely means ancestor or predecessor, a common use of the word in the ancient world.

"In the same hour, the fingers of a man's hand came out and wrote near the lamp stand on the plaster of the wall of the king's palace." The king saw the hand writing. His face went pale. His knees knocked together. The party stopped.

None of Belshazzar's wise men could read the writing. Then the queen, probably his mother or grandmother, came in and reminded him of a man who had served Nebuchadnezzar, a man with "an excellent spirit." Daniel, now probably in his eighties, was brought in.

Belshazzar offered him purple robes, a gold chain, and the third highest position in the kingdom. Daniel replied, "Let your gifts be to yourself, and give your rewards to another." He wasn't interested in rewards. But he would read the writing.

First, Daniel reminded Belshazzar of what had happened to Nebuchadnezzar. Then he said, "You, his son, Belshazzar, have not humbled your heart, though you knew all this." Belshazzar knew the story. He just didn't care. He had praised gods that "don't see, or hear, or know," and he had not honored "the God in whose hand your breath is."

Then Daniel read the words: "MENE, MENE, TEKEL, UPHARSIN."

BACKGROUND CHECK **MENE, MENE, TEKEL, UPHARSIN**

These Aramaic words were names of weights or coins, like saying pound, pound, ounce, and halves. They also sound like verbs. Daniel explained: "MENE: God has counted your kingdom, and brought it to an end. TEKEL: you are weighed in the balances, and are found wanting. PERES: your kingdom is divided, and given to the Medes and Persians." Peres, the singular of upharsin, also sounds like the word for Persians. The phrase the writing on the wall has become an English expression for a clear sign that something is about to end.

REAL TALK **Weighed and Found Wanting**

Belshazzar had all the power, money, and luxury anyone could want. But when God put him on the scale, he didn't measure up. He had treated holy things as party props and ignored the God who gave him every breath. It's a sobering reminder that what matters most isn't how impressive you look to others. It's who you are before God. The good news is that, in Jesus, God offers us His own righteousness when we fall short. We don't have to be found wanting.

That same night, the end came. "In that night Belshazzar the Chaldean King was slain." The Persian army entered Babylon. Ancient historians say they diverted the Euphrates River and entered through the riverbed while the city was celebrating. The empire that had seemed unbeatable fell in a single night, in 539 BC. Nebuchadnezzar humbled himself and was restored. Belshazzar refused and was destroyed.

REAL TALK **Parties, Pressure, and Respect**

Belshazzar's party in Daniel 5 was fueled by heavy drinking, and it led to disrespect for sacred things and terrible decisions while the enemy was literally at the gate. Alcohol and drugs can lower your judgment and make you do things you'd never normally do. If you're at a party where things are getting out of control, it's always okay to leave. Have a plan with a parent or trusted adult, like a code word you can text so they'll come get you, no questions asked. Your safety matters more than looking cool.

KEY VERSE

Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and extol and honor the King of heaven; for all his works are truth, and his ways justice; and those who walk in pride he is able to abase.

Daniel 4:37 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. What did Nebuchadnezzar say on the palace roof that showed his pride?
2. Why do you think his sanity returned when he lifted his eyes to heaven?
3. What was the difference between Nebuchadnezzar and Belshazzar?
4. Where are you tempted to take credit for what God has given you?

TRY THIS *Each night this week, write down three things you're proud of, and next to each one, write how God made it possible. Thank Him for each one.*

CHAPTER 5

The Lions' Den

Daniel 6

Babylon had fallen. A new empire was in charge: the Medes and Persians. And the man who received the kingdom in Babylon was called Darius the Mede.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Fair Questions: Who Was Darius the Mede?**
> Darius the Mede is a puzzle, because no ancient record outside the Bible clearly mentions a ruler by that name. Scholars have proposed several solutions. Some think Darius the Mede was another name or title for Cyrus the Great himself. Others think he was Gubaru, a governor Cyrus appointed over Babylon. Others suggest Cyaxares, a Median king, or another official. Some scholars think the name reflects a later author combining traditions. Since ancient records from this period are incomplete, many Christians are content to leave the question open while trusting the story's message.

Darius reorganized the kingdom. He appointed 120 local governors, called satraps, and put three top administrators over them. Daniel was one of the three. By now, Daniel was probably in his eighties. He had served under Nebuchadnezzar, survived the fall of Babylon, and now was trusted by a brand new government.

And he was so good at his job that the king planned to put him in charge of the whole kingdom. "Then this Daniel was distinguished above the presidents and the local governors, because an excellent spirit was in him."

That made the other officials jealous. They searched for something they could use against him. But "they could find no occasion or fault, because he was faithful. There wasn't any error or fault found in him."

> **REAL TALK** **A Clean Record**
>
> Daniel's enemies dug through his record looking for dirt. They checked his work, his finances, and his behavior. They found nothing. That's an amazing compliment. Today, almost everything you do can leave a record, like your texts, your posts, your comments, and your search history. It's worth asking: if someone went looking for dirt on you, what would they find? You don't have to be perfect. Nobody is. But you can build a life of integrity, where you're the same person online and offline, in public and in private. And if there's something you regret, it's never too late to make it right and start fresh.

The officials finally concluded, "We won't find any occasion against this Daniel, unless we find it against him concerning the law of his God." The only thing they could attack was his faith.

So they came up with a plan. They went to the king and flattered him. They proposed a law: for thirty days, anyone who prayed to any god or human except King Darius would be thrown into the lions' den. They made it sound like everyone agreed, though Daniel, of course, hadn't been asked. Darius signed it. And under the law of the Medes and Persians, a signed decree couldn't be changed.

Think about what Daniel had seen in his long life. He'd been taken from home as a teenager. He'd served a king who threatened to cut people to pieces, watched his friends thrown into a furnace, seen a king lose his mind, and witnessed the fall of an empire in a single night. Through all of it, he'd kept praying. Now, at the end of his career, his faithfulness was about to be tested one more time.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Lions in the Ancient World**

Lions lived in the ancient Near East, including Mesopotamia and Persia. Kings were often shown hunting lions as a sign of their power, and Assyrian palace carvings show elaborate royal lion hunts. Some kings kept lions in captivity. A lions' den was probably a pit or underground enclosure, with an opening at the top and a stone that could be rolled over it. Being thrown in was meant to be a death sentence.

What would Daniel do? He could have prayed silently. He could have closed his windows. He could have taken a thirty-day break from prayer. Instead, "When Daniel knew that the writing was signed, he went into his house (now his windows were open in his room toward Jerusalem) and he kneeled on his knees three times a day, and prayed, and gave thanks before his God, as he did before."

The key words are as he did before. Daniel didn't start praying because of the crisis. He didn't stage a protest. He just kept doing what he had done for decades. His prayer habit was so strong that a death threat couldn't break it.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Praying Toward Jerusalem**

Why did Daniel face Jerusalem when he prayed? When Solomon dedicated the temple, he asked God to hear the prayers of His people when they were in exile, if they prayed toward the land, the city, and the temple. Daniel was doing exactly that, even though the temple was in ruins. It was a sign of his hope that God would keep His promises and bring His people home. Today, Jewish synagogues around the world are often built so that worshipers face Jerusalem during prayer.

REAL TALK **Habits That Hold You**

Daniel's courage in chapter 6 didn't come from nowhere. It grew from decades of daily prayer. When the big test came, his habits held him steady. The same is true for you. The faith you build in ordinary moments, like praying before school, reading a few verses before bed, or thanking God at

> meals, is what will carry you when hard moments come. Start small. Maybe pray for two minutes in the morning, at lunch, and at night. Put a reminder on your phone. Over time, those small habits become a strong foundation.

The officials caught Daniel praying and reported him. The king was devastated. He realized he'd been tricked, and he tried all day to find a way to save Daniel. But the law couldn't be changed. So at sunset, Daniel was thrown into the lions' den. And the king said something surprising: "Your God whom you serve continually, he will deliver you."

A stone was rolled over the opening and sealed. The king went back to his palace. He didn't eat. He didn't allow any entertainment. He couldn't sleep.

At dawn, the king hurried to the den and called out in an anguished voice, "Daniel, servant of the living God, is your God, whom you serve continually, able to deliver you from the lions?"

And from the darkness came Daniel's voice. "My God has sent his angel, and has shut the lions' mouths, and they have not hurt me, because innocence was found in me before him; and also before you, O king, I have done no harm."

Think about that night from Daniel's point of view. He was an old man in a pit, in the dark, surrounded by hungry lions. The Bible doesn't tell us what he did all night. Maybe he prayed. Maybe he slept. Hebrews 11 lists people "who through faith subdued kingdoms, worked out righteousness, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions." Daniel's faith didn't make the den any less dark. But it meant he wasn't alone in it.

REAL TALK **Respect and Faithfulness Together**

Notice how respectful Daniel still was, even after the king had signed the law that sent him to the lions. He said, O king, live forever, and told the king he had done him no harm. Daniel wasn't rebellious or bitter. He was loyal to the king in every way except the one that would have meant betraying God. That's a great model. You can respect parents, teachers, coaches, and leaders, and still say no when obeying them would mean doing something God clearly forbids. Peter and the apostles later said, We must obey God rather than men. But like Daniel, they said it respectfully.

The king was overjoyed. Daniel was lifted out of the den, "and no kind of harm was found on him, because he had trusted in his God." Then the men who had accused Daniel faced the punishment they had planned for him.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Hard Passage: The Accusers' Families**

Daniel 6:24 records that the accusers, along with their wives and children, were thrown into the lions' den. That's disturbing to read. It's important to notice that this was the Persian king's decision, not God's command, and not something Daniel asked for. Ancient empires often punished whole families to wipe out any chance of revenge. The Bible records many things it doesn't approve of. In fact, the law of Moses specifically said children should not be put to death for their parents' sins, and Ezekiel 18 repeated it. The story shows the cruelty of human empires, in contrast with the God who protects the innocent.

Darius then wrote to all the peoples of his kingdom, commanding them to honor Daniel's God. "For he is the living God, and steadfast forever. His kingdom is that which will not be destroyed. His dominion will be even to the end. He delivers and rescues."

The chapter ends simply. "So this Daniel prospered in the reign of Darius and in the reign of Cyrus the Persian." The teenager who

arrived in Babylon seventy years earlier was still standing, still praying, still faithful.

REAL TALK **Jealousy**

The officials who plotted against Daniel were driven by jealousy. They couldn't stand that he was more successful and respected than they were. Jealousy can make people do ugly things, like spreading rumors, excluding someone, or trying to get them in trouble. If you've been the target of someone's jealousy, it's not your fault. Keep doing what's right, like Daniel did. And if you notice jealousy in your own heart, be honest with God about it. Ask Him to help you celebrate other people's success instead of resenting it.

KEY VERSE

When Daniel knew that the writing was signed, he went into his house (now his windows were open in his room toward Jerusalem) and he kneeled on his knees three times a day, and prayed, and gave thanks before his God, as he did before.

Daniel 6:10 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why couldn't Daniel's enemies find anything against him?
2. Why do you think Daniel kept praying with his windows open?
3. How did Daniel show respect for the king while still obeying God?
4. What daily habits are shaping your faith right now?

TRY THIS *Choose three times each day this week to pray, even briefly. Set reminders on your phone, and give thanks each time, like Daniel did.*

CHAPTER 6

Four Beasts and the Son of Man

Daniel 7–8

With chapter 7, Daniel changes completely. The stories are over. Now come the visions. And they're some of the wildest in the Bible.

Chapter 7 actually goes back in time, to the first year of Belshazzar, before the writing on the wall. "Daniel had a dream and visions of his head while on his bed." He saw the four winds of heaven stirring up the great sea. And out of the sea came four huge beasts, each different from the others.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **The Sea**
>
> In the ancient world, the sea often represented chaos, danger, and forces that opposed order. Many ancient Near Eastern stories pictured monsters rising from the sea. In the Bible, God is the one who rules over the sea, setting its boundaries and calming its storms. When Daniel sees beasts coming out of the sea, it signals that these powers are chaotic and destructive. When Jesus calmed a storm on the Sea of Galilee, His disciples asked, Who is this, that even the wind and the sea obey Him? Revelation promises a new creation where there will be no more sea.

The first beast was like a lion with eagle's wings. Its wings were torn off, and it was made to stand like a human, and given a human heart. The second was like a bear, raised up on one side, with three ribs in its mouth. It was told, "Arise! Devour much flesh!" The third was like a leopard with four wings and four heads. And the fourth

was the most terrifying of all. It had huge iron teeth. It crushed and devoured its victims and trampled what was left. It had ten horns. And then a little horn came up among them, uprooting three of the others. This horn had human eyes and "a mouth speaking arrogantly."

BACKGROUND CHECK **Beasts and Empires**

An angel later told Daniel that the four beasts were four kingdoms. They match the four metals of Nebuchadnezzar's statue in chapter 2. Many interpreters connect the lion with Babylon, since lions with wings were a common symbol in Babylonian art. As with chapter 2, Christians have often identified the four kingdoms as Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, and Rome, while many scholars see Babylon, Media, Persia, and Greece. Notice the contrast: in chapter 2, Nebuchadnezzar saw human empires as a glorious statue. In chapter 7, God shows Daniel what they're really like: beasts.

Then the scene changed. "I watched until thrones were placed, and one who was Ancient of Days sat. His clothing was white as snow, and the hair of his head like pure wool. His throne was fiery flames, and its wheels burning fire."

A river of fire flowed from His presence. Millions served Him. "The judgment was set. The books were opened." The beasts that had seemed so terrifying were now on trial. The fourth beast was destroyed. The others lost their power.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Ancient of Days**

The Ancient of Days is a title for God, emphasizing that He has existed forever, long before any empire rose. His white hair is a sign of wisdom and age, not weakness. His throne of fire, with wheels, recalls Ezekiel's vision of God's throne-chariot. The scene shows the true reality behind history. While beasts rage on the earth, God sits calmly on His throne, and He will judge every power that has ever existed.

And then came the most important moment in the vision. "I saw in the night visions, and behold, there came with the clouds of the sky one like a son of man, and he came even to the Ancient of Days, and they brought him near before him. Dominion was given him, and glory, and a kingdom, that all the peoples, nations, and languages should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion, which will not pass away, and his kingdom one that will not be destroyed."

The beasts came up from the sea. This figure came with the clouds of heaven. The beasts were animals. This figure was like a human being. The beasts ruled by violence. This figure was given authority by God. And while the beasts' kingdoms ended, His kingdom would last forever.

BACKGROUND CHECK **One Like a Son of Man**

In the Old Testament, riding on the clouds was something only God did. Psalms and Isaiah picture God riding on the clouds. So the figure in Daniel 7 is a mystery: He looks human, but He comes with the clouds like God, and all nations serve Him. Some Jewish interpreters understood Him as the Messiah. Others saw Him as a symbol of God's faithful people, since the angel later says "the saints of the Most High will receive the kingdom." Christians believe both are true: Jesus is the Son of Man, and He shares His kingdom with His people. Jesus used Son of Man as His favorite title for Himself, more than eighty times in the Gospels.

REAL TALK **When the Beasts Seem to Be Winning**

The little horn in Daniel 7 "made war with the saints, and prevailed against them," for a time. Sometimes it feels like evil is winning: in the world, in your school, or even in your own family. Daniel's vision doesn't pretend that isn't happening. But it shows the bigger picture. The beasts are on a leash. Their time is limited. The Ancient of Days is on His throne, and the Son of Man will receive the kingdom. Hold on. Evil's victory is temporary. God's kingdom is forever.

Daniel was deeply troubled by the vision. “As for me, Daniel, my thoughts troubled me greatly, and my face was changed in me; but I kept the matter in my heart.”

Two years later, in chapter 8, Daniel saw another vision. This time it was written in Hebrew again. He saw a ram with two horns, one longer than the other, charging west, north, and south. No one could stand against it. Then a male goat came from the west, moving so fast its feet didn’t touch the ground. It had one large horn between its eyes. It smashed into the ram, broke its horns, and trampled it. But at the height of its power, the goat’s great horn was broken, and four horns grew in its place. Out of one of them came a little horn that grew powerful and attacked God’s people and sanctuary.

This time, Daniel didn’t have to guess. The angel Gabriel explained it. “The ram which you saw, that had the two horns, they are the kings of Media and Persia. The rough male goat is the king of Greece. The great horn that is between his eyes is the first king.”

BACKGROUND CHECK **Alexander and Antiochus**

The goat’s great horn fits Alexander the Great, the young Greek king who conquered the Persian Empire with stunning speed in the 330s BC, starting from the west. He died suddenly in 323 BC, at only thirty-two, and his empire was divided among four of his generals. Most interpreters identify the little horn in chapter 8 as Antiochus IV Epiphanes, a Greek king from one of those divided kingdoms, who ruled about 175-164 BC. He tried to wipe out Jewish faith, banned the Sabbath and circumcision, and set up an altar to Zeus in the temple in Jerusalem around 167 BC. The Jewish revolt that followed, led by the Maccabees, eventually rededicated the temple. Jewish families still remember that victory each year at Hanukkah. Many Christians also see Antiochus as a preview of a final antichrist figure.

The vision overwhelmed Daniel. "I, Daniel, fainted, and was sick for some days. Then I rose up and did the king's business. I wondered at the vision, but no one understood it."

BACKGROUND CHECK **Fair Questions: Do the Little Horns Point Further?**

The little horn in Daniel 7 comes from the fourth beast, and the little horn in Daniel 8 comes from the goat. Are they the same figure? Many scholars think both point to Antiochus IV. Many Christians think the chapter 7 horn points to a future figure, often connected with the man of lawlessness Paul describes and the beast in Revelation, while the chapter 8 horn is Antiochus. Others see a pattern: Antiochus was a real historical enemy who also previews later enemies of God's people. Sincere Christians hold different views. What they share is confidence that every arrogant power that sets itself against God will be broken.

REAL TALK **When You Don't Understand Everything**

Even Daniel didn't understand all his visions. He was confused, overwhelmed, and sick. But then he got up and went back to work. He didn't let what he didn't understand stop him from being faithful in what he did understand. You'll find parts of the Bible confusing too, and that's okay. Ask questions. Talk to people who know more. Read good resources. But don't let confusion about the hard parts keep you from following the clear parts. Love God, love people, and keep going.

REAL TALK **How to Read Apocalyptic Visions**

Visions like Daniel 7 and 8 can feel confusing. Here are some tips. First, look for explanations in the text itself. Daniel often gets an angel to explain what he saw. Second, remember that symbols are meant to show what something is like, not to be taken literally, like a political cartoon that shows a nation as an animal. Third, focus on the big picture: human empires rise and fall, God judges evil, and His kingdom lasts forever. Fourth, be humble where Christians disagree. And fifth, remember that these visions were given to encourage God's people, not to scare them.

KEY VERSE

I saw in the night visions, and behold, there came with the clouds of the sky one like a son of man, and he came even to the Ancient of Days, and they brought him near before him. Dominion was given him, and glory, and a kingdom, that all the peoples, nations, and languages should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion, which will not pass away, and his kingdom one that will not be destroyed.

Daniel 7:13–14 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think God showed Daniel the empires as beasts?
2. What stands out to you about the Ancient of Days?
3. How is the Son of Man different from the beasts?
4. How can Daniel 7 give you courage when evil seems to be winning?

TRY THIS *Read Daniel 7:9-14 and Mark 14:60-64 side by side. Write down every connection you notice.*

CHAPTER 7

Prayer, Seventy Weeks, and Shining Like Stars

Daniel 9–12

Chapter 9 begins in the first year of Darius, right after Babylon fell. Daniel, now an old man, was reading the scroll of Jeremiah. And he noticed something. "I, Daniel, understood by the books the number of the years about which the LORD's word came to Jeremiah the prophet for the accomplishing of the desolations of Jerusalem, even seventy years."

Jeremiah had written that the exile would last seventy years. Daniel had been taken to Babylon about sixty-six years earlier. The time was almost up. So what did he do? He prayed.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Reading Jeremiah**
>
> Daniel was reading Jeremiah 25 and 29, where God promised that after seventy years in Babylon He would bring His people home. Notice that Daniel treated Jeremiah's writings as God's word, even though Jeremiah had only recently died. Daniel didn't just read the Bible for information. He responded to it with prayer. And notice how God's promise moved Daniel to pray more, not less. He didn't think, God promised, so I don't need to pray. He thought, God promised, so I will ask Him to do it.

"I set my face to the Lord God, to seek by prayer and petitions, with fasting and sackcloth and ashes." Daniel's prayer is one of the greatest prayers in the Bible. He begins with praise: "Oh, Lord, the great and dreadful God, who keeps covenant and loving kindness with those who love him and keep his commandments." Then he confesses. Not their sins, but our sins. We have sinned. We have done wrong. We have rebelled. Daniel was one of the most faithful people in the Bible, and yet he included himself.

Then he pleads for mercy. "To the Lord our God belong mercies and forgiveness, for we have rebelled against him." "We do not present our petitions before you for our righteousness, but for your great mercies' sake." And he ends with urgency: "Lord, hear. Lord, forgive. Lord, listen and do. Don't defer, for your own sake, my God."

> **REAL TALK** **How to Pray Like Daniel**
>
> Daniel's prayer in chapter 9 is a great model. He started with who God is, not with what he wanted. He confessed honestly, including himself with his people. He didn't ask God to act because he deserved it, but because God is merciful. And he asked boldly and specifically. You can pray like that too. Try this pattern: Praise God for who He is. Confess where you've gone wrong. Thank Him for His mercy. Ask for what you need, and for others. You don't need fancy words. Daniel's last line was just: Lord, hear. Lord, forgive. Lord, listen and do.

While Daniel was still praying, the angel Gabriel arrived. He said, "At the beginning of your petitions the commandment went out, and I have come to tell you, for you are greatly beloved." Before Daniel even finished, God had already answered. And notice what Gabriel called him: greatly beloved.

Then Gabriel gave Daniel one of the most debated prophecies in the Bible. "Seventy weeks are decreed on your people and on your holy city, to finish disobedience, to make an end of sins, to make reconciliation for iniquity, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal up vision and prophecy, and to anoint the most holy."

BACKGROUND CHECK **Fair Questions: The Seventy Weeks**

The Hebrew word for weeks literally means sevens. Most interpreters understand the seventy sevens as 490 years, divided into 7 sevens, 62 sevens, and 1 final seven. But Christians interpret them in very different ways. Some calculate the first 69 sevens from a Persian decree to rebuild Jerusalem, landing close to the time of Jesus, with the Anointed One being cut off pointing to His death. Some of those see a gap before the final seven, which they place in the future, connected to a final antichrist. Others see all seventy sevens fulfilled in Jesus' ministry, death, and the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. Many scholars see the prophecy fulfilled in the time of Antiochus IV, with the Anointed One being a high priest killed in 171 BC. Others read the numbers symbolically, as a complete period of God's plan, ten times the seventy years of exile. Different starting dates and calendars lead to different charts. This book won't push one chart. What's clear is the goal: God would deal with sin completely and bring in everlasting righteousness.

REAL TALK **Don't Miss the Point**

It's easy to get so caught up in charts, dates, and calculations that you miss what the Seventy Weeks are actually about. Look at the list in Daniel 9:24: finish disobedience, end sins, make reconciliation for iniquity, bring in everlasting righteousness. That's what God promised. Daniel had prayed for forgiveness, and God answered with a promise of complete forgiveness and righteousness. Christians believe that's exactly what Jesus came to do. The point of prophecy isn't to make you a better calculator. It's to make you trust the God who keeps His promises.

In chapter 10, Daniel was mourning and fasting for three weeks. Then he saw a dazzling figure by the Tigris River. The men with him

ran and hid. Daniel collapsed. But a hand touched him, and a voice said, "Don't be afraid, Daniel; for from the first day that you set your heart to understand, and to humble yourself before your God, your words were heard. I have come for your words' sake."

Then the messenger explained why it took three weeks. "But the prince of the kingdom of Persia withstood me twenty-one days; but, behold, Michael, one of the chief princes, came to help me."

Notice how gently the messenger treated Daniel. Daniel was shaking and couldn't speak or breathe. The messenger touched him three times, strengthening him a little more each time. God doesn't just send messages. He cares about the person receiving them. Even the most overwhelming visions in Daniel come with tender words: Don't be afraid. You are greatly beloved. Peace be to you.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Spiritual Warfare**

Daniel 10 gives a rare glimpse behind the curtain of the spiritual world. The prince of Persia and the prince of Greece appear to be spiritual powers connected with those nations, opposing God's messenger. Michael is an angel who protects God's people. Paul later wrote, "our wrestling is not against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers," and against spiritual forces of wickedness. Christians hold different views on how much detail we can know about these powers. But the Bible is clear that there is a spiritual battle, that God is far stronger than any opposing power, and that prayer matters in it. The Bible never tells us to fear these powers, or to be fascinated with them. It tells us to stand firm in God's strength.

REAL TALK **When Prayers Seem Delayed**

Daniel prayed for three weeks without seeing an answer. But his prayer had been heard on the first day. Sometimes you pray and nothing seems to happen. Days pass, then weeks. It's easy to think God isn't listening. Daniel 10 suggests that there can be more going on than you can see. Keep praying. A delay is not a denial, and silence doesn't mean God has stopped caring. The

> messenger told Daniel, “Greatly beloved man, don’t be afraid. Peace be to you. Be strong. Yes, be strong.” That’s God’s message to you too.

Chapter 11 contains a detailed prophecy of kings and wars, the king of the north against the king of the south. Most interpreters see it describing the conflicts between the Greek kingdoms that came after Alexander, leading up to Antiochus IV, with the last part either still about him or pointing ahead to a final enemy of God’s people. In the middle of all that conflict is a powerful promise: “the people who know their God will be strong and take action.”

> **REAL TALK** **The People Who Know Their God**
>
> Daniel 11:32 describes a time when a wicked ruler would flatter people into abandoning God. Some went along with it. But “the people who know their God will be strong and take action.” Notice the order. First they knew God. Then they were strong. Strength to stand firm doesn’t come from trying to look tough. It comes from knowing God personally, through prayer, Scripture, and walking with Him every day. When pressure comes, the people who know their God aren’t easily flattered or frightened.
>
> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Why Chapter 11 Matters**
>
> Daniel 11’s details match the history of the Ptolemies of Egypt, the king of the south, and the Seleucids of Syria, the king of the north, very closely. That’s one reason some scholars date Daniel later, believing the author wrote after these events. Christians who hold the traditional date see the same detail as evidence of genuine predictive prophecy. Christians hold different views on this. But either way, the chapter teaches that God knows history from beginning to end, and that even the darkest times are within His control.

And then comes chapter 12. “At that time Michael will stand up, the great prince who stands for the children of your people; and there will be a time of trouble, such as never was.” But God’s people will be delivered, “everyone who is found written in the book.”

And then one of the clearest promises of resurrection in the Old Testament. “Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. Those who are wise will shine as the brightness of the expanse. Those who turn many to righteousness will shine as the stars forever and ever.”

BACKGROUND CHECK **Resurrection**

Daniel 12:2 is one of the clearest Old Testament statements that the dead will be raised bodily. Earlier passages hint at it, like Job’s hope to see God in his flesh, Isaiah 26, and Ezekiel’s dry bones. But Daniel says it plainly: those who sleep in the dust will awake. Jesus echoed this when He said that all who are in the tombs will hear His voice and come out. Jesus also said, “Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the Kingdom of their Father,” echoing Daniel 12:3. Death isn’t the end.

REAL TALK **Hope Beyond Death**

If someone you love has died, Daniel 12:2 offers real hope. Death is described as sleep, something you wake up from. For those who belong to God, death isn’t the end of the story. That doesn’t make grief disappear. It’s still okay to miss people terribly and to cry. Paul wrote that Christians grieve, but not like people who have no hope. If you’re grieving, talk to someone you trust about how you’re feeling. And if your grief ever feels too heavy to carry, call or text 988 any time, day or night.

REAL TALK **Shine Like Stars**

Daniel 12:3 says those who are wise and who turn many to righteousness will shine like stars. You don’t have to be famous to shine. You shine when you’re kind to someone who’s lonely, when you tell the truth, when you stand up for someone being bullied, when you live out your faith with integrity, and when you point a friend toward Jesus. Paul wrote that Christians are “seen as lights in the world.” In a world that can feel dark, your faithfulness matters, now and forever.

At the end, Daniel admitted, “I heard, but I didn’t understand.” He asked how it would all end. And the angel told him, “Go your way, Daniel; for the words are shut up and sealed until the time of the end.” And then, the final words of the book, spoken to an old man who had been faithful since he was a teenager: “But go your way until the end; for you will rest, and will stand in your inheritance at the end of the days.”

Daniel didn’t get all the answers. But he got a promise. He would rest. And he would rise.

REAL TALK **A Lifetime of Faithfulness**

Daniel’s story covers about seventy years. He started as a frightened teenager in a foreign land and ended as a respected old man who had served four kings and three empires. He didn’t have a perfect life. He faced danger, loss, and confusion. But he stayed faithful the whole way. The choices you make now, about prayer, friends, integrity, and courage, are the beginning of your own long story. You don’t have to be perfect. Just keep turning back to God, one day at a time. That’s how a faithful teenager becomes a faithful old person.

KEY VERSE

Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. Those who are wise will shine as the brightness of the expanse. Those who turn many to righteousness will shine as the stars forever and ever.

Daniel 12:2–3 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. What can you learn from the way Daniel prayed in chapter 9?
2. Why do you think God called Daniel greatly beloved?
3. How does Daniel 10 change the way you think about delayed answers to prayer?
4. What would it look like for you to shine like a star this week?

TRY THIS *Use Daniel's pattern this week: praise, confess, thank, and ask. Write one short prayer each day following that pattern.*

THE END (AND THE BEGINNING)

Where This Points

Daniel's visions end with a promise: one day, God's kingdom will replace every human empire, and those who are wise will shine like the stars. Jewish readers have drawn hope from Daniel through centuries of persecution. Christians believe its hope comes to its fullest meaning in Jesus.

Daniel saw "one like a son of man" coming with the clouds to the Ancient of Days, receiving an everlasting kingdom. Jesus called Himself the Son of Man more than any other title. And when the high priest demanded to know if He was the Christ, Jesus answered, "I am. You will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of Power, and coming with the clouds of the sky." He was claiming to be the figure in Daniel 7, and the high priest knew it. In the fiery furnace, Nebuchadnezzar saw a fourth figure walking with the three friends. Many Christians have seen in that figure a glimpse of the Son of God, who doesn't always keep us out of the fire but promises to be with us in it. Jesus said, "I am with you always, even to the end of the age." And Daniel saw a stone cut without human hands that grew into a mountain filling the earth. Jesus began His ministry announcing, "The time is fulfilled, and God's Kingdom is at hand!" His kingdom started small, but it's still growing, and it will never be destroyed.

Here's what that means for you, as plainly as I can put it.

1 God made you, and He loves you.

God made you on purpose, and He loves you. He knows your name, even when the world tries to give you a new one.

> *For God so loved the world, that he gave his only born Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life.* **John 3:16 (WEB)**

2 We've all sinned.

Daniel prayed, We have sinned. So have we. The Bible says all of us have sinned.

> *for all have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God;* **Romans 3:23 (WEB)**

3 Sin has a real cost.

God is holy, so He doesn't shrug off evil. The Bible says its result is death, separation from God forever.

> *For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.* **Romans 6:23 (WEB)**

4 Jesus is the Son of Man.

Jesus is the Son of Man Daniel saw. He died for our sins, rose again, and was given an everlasting kingdom that will never be destroyed.

> *He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we, having died to sins, might live to righteousness. You were healed by his wounds.* **1 Peter 2:24 (WEB)**

5 You can't earn it. You receive it.

Daniel prayed for mercy, not because he was good enough, but because God is merciful. Salvation isn't a reward for being good enough. It's a gift you receive by trusting Jesus.

> *for by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, that no one would boast.*
> **Ephesians 2:8–9 (WEB)**

6 Bow to the true King.

Turn from running your own life, and trust Jesus as your Savior and King. Then you can know, not just hope, that you have eternal life.

> *that if you will confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.*
> **Romans 10:9 (WEB)**

So what do you do with that? You don't need perfect words. Daniel prayed three times a day, honestly and humbly. You can talk to God right now, wherever you are. If it helps, you could pray something like this:

> *God, I've lived like I'm the king of my own life, and I've gone my own way. I can't fix that myself. Thank You that Jesus, the Son of Man, died for my sins, rose again, and rules over a kingdom that will never end. Forgive me, and make me Yours. Help me stay faithful wherever I am, even when it's hard, and be with me in the fire. I trust Jesus as my Savior, and I want Him to be my King. In Jesus' name, amen.*

If You Just Said Yes

Tell someone. A parent, a youth leader, a pastor, or a Christian friend. Start there.

Read the real thing. Read Daniel 7, then Mark 14:55-65, from the vision to the trial.

Find your people. Get connected to a church where the Bible is taught and Jesus is honored. Ask about being baptized. Daniel had three friends. You need yours.

Build a rhythm. Like Daniel, choose regular times each day to pray and give thanks.

Not Sure Yet?

Not ready? That's honest, and honesty is a good place to start. Daniel's visions are puzzling, and even Daniel admitted he didn't understand everything. Keep asking. Keep reading. Just don't settle for "I already know all that."

Because if Daniel is right, every empire will fall, and only one kingdom will last forever. It's worth knowing who its King is.

He changes the times and the seasons. He removes kings and sets up kings. He gives wisdom to the wise, and knowledge to those who have understanding.

Daniel 2:21 (WEB)