

Teens Reading Plan The Prophets/Daniel

This final session of Generations of Faith focuses on The Prophetic Books. What is a prophet? First and foremost, a prophet is a person – or sometimes a group – who speaks for God. The prophet’s words spoken in God’s names – usually called prophecies or oracles – are God’s words. Some people think prophets can predict the future, but this is not their role in the Bible. The biblical prophets were called by God during times of crisis to offer God’s People challenge or comfort, depending on the circumstances. So, to properly understand biblical prophecies, we must try to understand the historical situations God was addressing through the prophets.

Through the prophets’ inspired messages, God reminded the Israelites of the covenant God had made with them. If the people or their leaders were not keeping their side of the covenant, the prophets challenged them to do so. If the people were in despair that God was not keeping God’s side of the covenant, the prophets promised that God would.

Most modern Bibles group the prophetic books at the end of the Hebrew Scriptures. They are divided into the *major prophets* and *minor prophets*. The major prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel) are listed first; *major* not because their messages are more important, but simply because they are lengthier. From Hosea through Malachi, twelve minor prophets’ writings, shorter in length, follow one by one.

The prophets in the two groups above are also known as the writing prophets. But Scripture also teems with prophets from whom we have not one written word: Elijah, Elisha, Nathan, and so on.

As you read these books, keep this in mind: the role of prophets has not died, only changed. In every age, there are people who challenge us to be faithful to God and remind us about God’s faithful love for us.

For this session, we have elected to read the Book of Daniel. The following information comes from The Catholic Youth Bible, from Saint Mary’s Press..

Do you have a favorite superhero from television or comic books? One characteristic of these larger-than-life heroes is their commitment to their own values and to saving victims of injustice. The Book of Daniel portrays just such a hero. Daniel’s powers are his courage to remain faithful to God despite the threat of punishment, and his special visions, which foresee how things will turn out good even though the present situation seem far from hopeful. These powers enable him to lead his people on the right path in a foreign land filled with persecution and idolatry.

Daniel represents the ideal leader with the spiritual and prophetic insight to lead people through troubled times. Scholars question whether he was an actual person. If he was, he lived in the sixth century BC – but the Book of Daniel was written four hundred years later, during the reign of an evil Greek-Syrian king, Antiochus IV Epiphanes. This was also the time of the Maccabean revolt told about in First and Second Maccabees. King Antiochus desecrated the Temple and attempted to erase many of Israel’s religious practices. To many in Israel, this seemed like the end of the world.

The author of the Book of Daniel writes about the great hero Daniel to give the people hope during this persecution. Chapters 1-6 present six stories of Daniel and three friends living their faith during the Babylonian Exile. Chapters 7-12 tell of Daniel’s four visions about the empires that dominated Israel after the Exile: Media, Persia and Greece. The visions are full of strange symbols meant to be understood by the Israelites but not the Greek rulers of the author’s time.

As you read the Book of Daniel, you will find themes familiar from other biblical books. Like

Baruch, it describes living faithfully in a strange land. Like First and Second Maccabees, the books shows the courage of the Israelites willing to die for their beliefs. And it declares even more clearly than Second Maccabees and Wisdom of Solomon the belief in life after death. Daniel is shown as the ideal Jew – the embodiment of all the best of the people in exile. In the face of unjust persecution and oppression, he leads his people in faithfulness to God, even through death itself.

April 26-May 2

Daniel and Companions

Read Daniel Chapters 1-3

The book of Daniel begins in the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim (ca. 605 B.C.). In this same year Nebuchadnezzar established control over a large part of the Eastern Mediterranean region. Daniel and his three companions are among those taken hostage.

Daniel and three other young men from the family of King David “avoid 'defiling' themselves with the king's 'rich food' (Dan 1:8). Not only were these foods a violation of Mosaic food laws, but the food of the king would have been ritually offered to his false Gods, thus, eating them would have constituted participating in the worship of those false gods. These four worshippers of the Lord grapple with the problem of remaining faithful to God when there is no longer access to the Temple liturgy.

In the second chapter of Daniel, Daniel is able to correctly tell and interpret King Nebuchadnezzar's dream.

Chapter 3 of Daniel tells us of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, three companions of Daniel's who refuse to compromise their religious beliefs. Even in the face of death, they will not denounce the Lord and worship the god of Nebuchadnezzar. Instead, they become willing human sacrifices to their own God. Happily, God shows his sovereignty by sparing them this fate and vindicating his worshippers.

May 3-May 10

Nebuchadnezzar and Visions

Read Daniel Chapters 4-8

Sometimes, it seems God has to go to extremes to get our attention. In Daniel, chapter 4 (written like a letter from the king to his subjects), King Nebuchadnezzar tells how he had to go through some pretty intense humiliation – acting like a wild animal (4:29-20) – before God got his attention. Even Daniel's prior warning didn't rein in his ego and bring him to his sense (4:23-24). After Nebuchadnezzar's reason returned, he realized the power of God and turned to praise and honor God.

In chapter 5 we see the story of the writing on the wall, and in Chapter 6 we see how after refusing to follow the law forbidding prayer to any god or man but Darius, Daniel is thrown into the lion's den. This is similar to chapter 3 with Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. Daniel consents to *become* a sacrifice at the teeth of the lions. Yet once again God vindicates those who worship him against their enemies and through 'signs and wonders' shows that he is the true king and his is the true kingdom.

As you read Chapters 7-10 of Daniel, you might ask, What's with the four beasts in chapter 7, and the goat with the horn in chapter 8, and the man with the face like lightning in chapter 10? These are all examples of apocalyptic literature. *Apocalypse* is a Greek word meaning “to uncover or reveal.” Apocalyptic literature is written to sound like an attempt to foretell the future by using symbols and visions. But the symbols are often codes for people and events in the present. This type of literature frequently is produced during times of persecution, when using real names could get a person in trouble or even killed.

The Book of Daniel contains some explanation of the visions it describes. But sometimes, you will have to consult a good Bible Commentary (a book that gives additional background on Bible

passages) to completely understand the symbols. For instance, the four beasts in chapter 7 are symbols for Babylon, Media, Persian and Greece – the four nations that ruled over Israel but would pass away. The arrogant eleventh horn on the fourth beast's head is a symbol for Antiochus IV Epiphanes, the king who persecuted the Jews during the time Daniel was written.

May 11-May 18

Chronology until the Messiah

Read Daniel Chapters 9-12

In chapter 9, Daniel gives us a great example of the various ways we can pray to God. The prophet uses four types of prayer:

- intercession, because he prays on behalf of the people
- praise, because he proclaims God to be awesome and great
- sorrow, because he expresses sadness for past sinfulness and asks for forgiveness
- petition, because he asks God for help.

Most of the Old Testament contains no indication of a belief in life after death. Daniel, however, speaks of individual resurrection, or rising to life from death. The understanding of personal resurrection developed quite late in Israel's existence. It is described as the complete transformation of the human being, body and spirit, after death. Daniel 12:3 says the resurrected will shine like star.

May 19-May 26

A story of Susanna and stories of Bel and the Dragons

Read Daniel Chapters 13 & 14

The story of Susanna happens when Daniel is a young man. Susanna chooses to risk death rather than submitting to sin. Her prayer demanding God's justice causes the Holy Spirit to stir Daniel into action.

Chapter 14, commonly known as 'Bel and the Dragon' actually comprises two narratives. In the first, Daniel discusses idolatry with King Cyrus of Persia (Dan 14:1-22). In the second story, Daniel slays a sacred Babylonian dragon by feeding it cakes of pitch, fat, and hair until it bursts (Dan 14:23-42). These two stories of Daniel's struggle against the pagan cults of Babylon constitute a fitting final word to the book, which, as we have seen, has been from the beginning to end an account of conflict between the pagan kingdoms of men and the everlasting kingdom of God.

While this is the end of our study of the Old Testament for Generations of Faith, we urge you to continue reading the Bible. One option for doing this is listening to Father Mike Schmitz' Bible in a Year podcast to help you read through the complete Bible this year. It is never too late to join in at <https://media.ascensionpress.com/category/ascension-podcasts/bibleinayear/>