

# BIBLE CHALLENGE

## A 1 week study of the books of Esther and Daniel

The story so far: We finish our journey through the Old Testament this week with a look at two final books. Both are set during the period of the exile but were probably written later, sometime after the return.

The book of Esther traces the story of a Jewish woman who remained behind in Persia, as did other Jews, after the exiles returned to Judah. It takes place during the time of King Xerxes of Persia (486-465 BC) (1:1). As the book opens, Xerxes is married to Queen Vashti who loses favor with the king over an act of disobedience. Xerxes then sets about searching for a new queen (2:2) and comes upon Esther (2:5-8, 17-18) whose cousin's name is Mordecai.

One of the unique characteristics of the book is that no where in Esther is God ever specifically mentioned, nor does it present God as directly involving himself in the events of the story. Finding God in Esther requires a little closer look, perhaps as it does in our own lives.

**Monday:**

Read: Esther 3:1-6, 8-11, 4:1-17, 8:3-8, 11, 16-17

What to look for:

- By intervening with Xerxes on behalf of her people Esther was risking not only her royal standing but even her life. What circumstances today might call you to take an unpopular or even risky stand for the sake of justice or to help someone who is being persecuted? How might the world have been different had Christians been more willing to take a stand against Nazi Germany's persecution of the Jews in World War 2? From where does that kind of courage come?
- According to Mordecai, what is the danger in remaining silent in the face of injustice? (4:12-14)
- How is God indirectly involved in what takes place in this story? (See 4:14) 4:14 presents the central idea of the book. What does it suggest as to how God is involved behind the scenes in your own life?

The book of Daniel is a collection of stories that are also placed during the time of the Babylonian captivity of the Jews. Daniel, like Joseph in the book of Genesis, served a pagan king in a foreign government, requiring him to maintain the integrity of his faith even while living and working among people whose beliefs often conflicted with his own.

Tuesday:

Read: Daniel 1:1-8a, 2:1-6, 26-44, 46-49

What to look for:

- 2:31-35 contains the king's dream. He sees a big statue, parts of which are comprised of various materials. In vs. 38ff Daniel explains the meaning of the dream. The dream and its meaning outline the key concept in Daniel, that one after another human kingdoms rise and fall, but in the end they all must give way to the kingdom of God. God's kingdom will endure after the collapse of every other human kingdom.
- How might this be an encouraging or disturbing word to modern day Americans?

Wednesday:

Read: Daniel 3

What to look for:

- Note the interplay in this story between the men's loyalty to their government and their primary allegiance to God. They could not serve both, requiring them to choose where they would invest their trust. Ironically, this was the very issue that had plagued God's people throughout the centuries as they struggled over who would be their God and where they would locate their worship. It was their consistently wrong choice that had ultimately brought them into exile in the first place. Here in a foreign land, on the other hand, are three Jews who are willing to sacrifice themselves to make the right choice.
- In the end, those who held onto their faith in the face of persecution and threat were vindicated.

Thursday:

Read: Daniel 6

What to look for:

- Darius (a Persian) is now king, having overthrown the previous Babylonian king and his empire in 5:30. The king's dream, which we read about on Tuesday, is being fulfilled: Rulers who exalt themselves, and their human kingdoms, must always, eventually collapse.
- Daniel, like Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego from yesterday's reading, faces a fundamental conflict between the expectations of the society in which he lives and the practice of his faith. Daniel, like the other three, refuses to resolve this conflict through compromise. Note in vs. 10 that Daniel, in the face of pressure to modify his worship, remains devout "just as he had always been." What conflicts can you identify in your own life between the expectations of your surrounding culture and the practice of your faith? How do you go about resolving them? What different choices might you make if you were to respond as Daniel does?

- Note vs. 26 in that it again presents the theme of the book of Daniel, that God's kingdom endures beyond the crumbling of human kingdoms.

Friday:

Read: Daniel 7

What to look for:

- This is the first in a series of visions that Daniel relates from chapter 7 to the end of the book.
- These visions represent a type of literature, known as *apocalyptic literature*, which employs strange and wild images, is futuristic and looks forward to the end times. Often this type of literature makes heavy use of symbolism and signs, and its theme always has to do with how God's will and plan will finally be worked out in some cataclysmic way despite the fact that current circumstances make that seem unlikely. If this section of Daniel sounds to you like the book of Revelation, it is because they both are written in the same apocalyptic literary style.
- Each one of the creatures represents the rising of a kingdom.
- You might want to compare Daniel's vision of the Ancient of Days in vs. 9-10 and vs. 13-14 with John's vision in Revelation 1:12-18.
- When, in the Gospels, we hear Jesus speaking about how we will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven, this is the image to which he is referring. (Mark 14:62)
- Consistent with the themes of apocalyptic literature, this vision of Daniel's affirms that those who currently hold earthly power will not in the end prevail; the final victory, through God's cosmic power, will go to the faithful bringing with it final judgment and an end to persecution; and evil will be vanquished.