

# GOD RULES

*A Devotional Commentary on Daniel*



*JAMES T. (TOMMY) SOUTH*

# **God Rules**

**A Devotional Commentary on Daniel**

**James T. (Tommy) South**



*God Rules: A Devotional Commentary on Daniel*

Copyright © 2025 by James T. (Tommy) South and Sunset Institute Press

Cover design by Kristin Hagins; book layout by Richard Cravy

All rights reserved.

Publication rights granted by author to Sunset Institute Press, 3710 34th Street,  
Lubbock TX 79410

Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are from the English Standard Version<sup>®</sup> translation of the Bible. Any italicized portions of otherwise non-italicized Scripture texts and quotations should be assumed to be the author's additions.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review or when used in a not for profit educational setting.

ISBN 978-0-9600193-0-4 (Print)

Image on front cover of "Glazed panel of a lion from the Throne Room of Nebuchadnezzar II" in British Museum used from Wikimedia Commons website. Licensed for use under Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike License.

Lion image used on chapter title pages of unknown origin.

# Contents

Preface	v
1. Introduction: The God Who Rules the Nations	1
2. Faithful Non-Assimilation	11
<i>Daniel 1:1-21</i>	
3. Nebuchadnezzar's Nightmare	21
<i>Daniel 2:1-30</i>	
4. "By No Human Hand"	31
<i>Daniel 2:31-49, Matthew 16:18-19</i>	
5. "Our God Is Able"	43
<i>Daniel 3:1-30</i>	
6. Nebuchadnezzar Speaks	53
<i>Daniel 4:1-37</i>	
7. The Handwriting on the Wall	67
<i>Daniel 5:1-31</i>	
8. Daniel and His God	77
<i>Daniel 6:1-28</i>	
9. Dominion, Glory, & A Kingdom	91
<i>Daniel 7:1-28</i>	
10. A Ram, A Goat, & A Little Horn	103
<i>Daniel 8:1-27</i>	
11. The Prayer of the Prophet	115
<i>Daniel 9:1-19</i>	
12. The Gospel According to Gabriel	125
<i>Daniel 9:20-27</i>	
13. The Final Vision (1)	135
<i>Daniel 10:1-21</i>	
14. The Final Vision (2)	145
<i>Daniel 11:1-12:4</i>	
15. Wait for It!	155
<i>Daniel 12:5-13</i>	



# Preface

## *A Long Labor*

Bringing a book to the light of day has sometimes been compared to giving birth to a child. If there is any truth to that comparison, then this one is the result of a rather long labor.

The studies on which this book is based began many years ago in a rather hit-and-miss fashion and were developed and refined over decades. The writing began in earnest in 2022 but was interrupted by the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February of that year. Since we had been involved in Ukraine for more than three decades by that time, the war and the necessary relief effort occupied a great deal of time. So, I didn't return to the writing until late in 2024, during which time I had the opportunity to teach Daniel once again via the Internet to a group of Ukrainian churches. I like to think the delay at least matured my thinking and that it has hopefully made this book better than it would have been otherwise.

One thing the delay and revisiting of Daniel did was to confirm my belief that many of the usual approaches to the book are unproduc-

tive at best. There has been, in my view, entirely too much wrangling over the attempt to fix dates based on obscure references in Daniel and the felt need to be overly precise in explaining the details of the visions. Some may think that my approach touches on these matters too lightly, but I am okay with that, since others have taken what might be considered a heavier hand; as a result, we have more than one way of looking at the book, which probably isn't a bad thing. In Acts 1:7, our Lord reminds us that not everything that arouses our curiosity is ours to know, no matter how strongly we might wish otherwise.

### *A “Devotional Commentary”?*

You may rightly wonder what I mean by this expression. There are many commentaries, but few would describe themselves as “devotional” in nature. Put briefly, a commentary seeks to explain the meaning of the text being studied, i.e., using all the tools available – historical, linguistic, and literary ones to name a few – to try to arrive at the original author's intended meaning, and that is a very fine thing to do. All of us who preach, teach, or write on biblical themes are to some extent dependent on commentaries and appreciate the labors of those who produce them.

But commentaries sometimes – usually, in fact – stop short of helping us apply the text in a spiritual way. They typically give large amounts of information, then leave it to the reader to decide what to do with it. This isn't a criticism; it is simply what the goal of producing a commentary generally is. A “devotional” commentary, such as the one I am attempting here, tries to explain the text, but also to help the believing reader see how the text relates to what we believe and how we should live in light of what we believe. So, this is in a very real sense also a “believer's commentary.” Those who reject the Book of Daniel as Scripture, as Word of God, will have little interest in what I have written, since it pointedly has believers



in view. But my hope and prayer is that believers will not only have a clearer grasp of the meaning of the text, but a clearer idea of what to do with it, of how to allow it to shape their faith and lives.

Every good preacher and teacher of Scripture knows that we haven't really taught God's Word until we address the "so what?" question. That is, now that we understand the text (or as nearly so as possible at this stage in our spiritual development and knowledge), what do we do with it? What difference does it or ought it to make in how we live out our faith? This "devotional commentary" attempts to keep the "so what?" question at the forefront at all times. It is my hope and prayer that reading these pages will not only give you a better understanding of the text of Daniel, but will draw you into a closer relationship with God and into a greater determination to walk in His ways.

You will notice that, while there are some footnotes in this work, many of them simply point the reader to additional or explanatory Scriptures or try to clarify some statement that might otherwise be misunderstood. There are some that cite commentaries written by others. In each case, these are commentaries that I have found useful for both understanding and application. Had I cited them each time they contributed to my own conclusions, the footnotes would be far too numerous. So let's just say that I have borrowed freely and cited sparingly in order not to burden the reader with details you may not be interested in anyway, and that I freely acknowledge my debt to the work of others.

### *Why Daniel?*

For those who may be wondering why I have chosen to write on Daniel, especially since I am in no way a specialist in Old Testament studies, allow me to offer this explanation.



In studying closely the text of Daniel, I simply fell in love with both the man and his book. I love all of Scripture (even the parts I find repetitious or hard to understand), but I came to appreciate Daniel in a special way. The prophet lived in troubled times not unlike our own, when faith in “the God of heaven” is largely rejected and often mocked. And yet he displayed extraordinary courage in standing up for his convictions and speaking the truth to power, even when it could have cost him his life. And his highest goals and desires were to see the promises of God fulfilled in his people, only to not live to see them come to fruition. Yet despite that disappointment, he remained faithful to his assigned task. What an inspiring character Daniel is, and what an inspiring (as well as inspired) book he has left us!

And we know for certain that God had a high estimation of His prophet as well. In asserting to another prophet, Ezekiel, the absolute certainty of the outworking of His judgment on any land, once its judgment has been decreed, the Lord said, “even if these three men, Noah, Daniel, and Job, were in it, they would deliver but their own lives by their righteousness, declares the Lord God.”<sup>1</sup> That’s an amazing attestation to Daniel’s greatness, isn’t it.

So, as you read, ask yourself in what ways you need to become more like Daniel. How can you learn to put the interests of God’s Kingdom above your own, to have the courage to stand by your convictions regardless of the cost personally, and to speak the truth even when it may put you at a disadvantage in your culture, your work, your community, and in your own family? Following the example of Daniel is just one more way to become more like what Jesus calls us all to be.<sup>2</sup>

A few words of explanation about the citation of Scripture texts. Unless otherwise noted, quotations are from the English Standard

---

1. Ezekiel 14:14.

2. Matthew 6:33, 10:26-33.

Version of the Bible. And wherever portions of the text appear in italics, you can assume that the emphasis is always mine, not that of the ESV editors and translators.



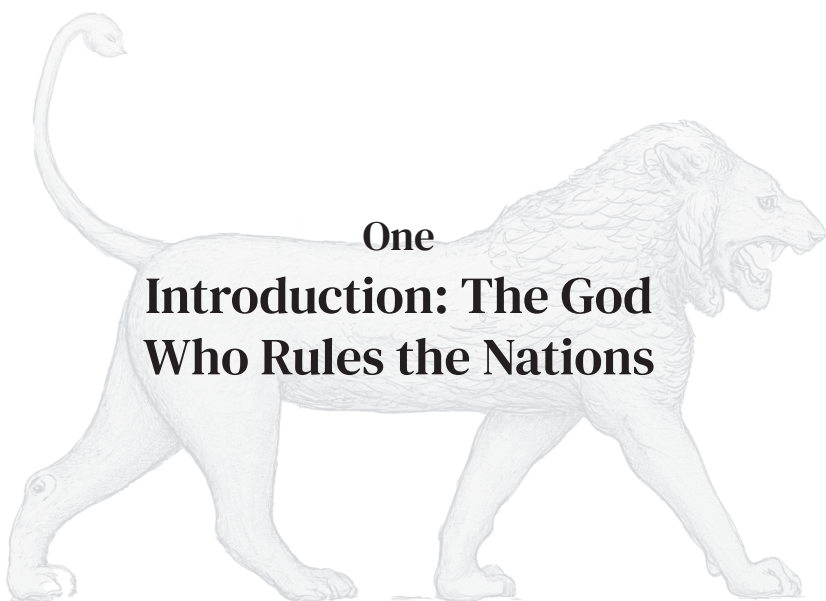
# Dedication

*To my brothers and sisters in the Churches of Christ in western Ukraine,  
this book is affectionately dedicated.*

*Your consistent faith and love for God and one another, even in the most  
trying of times, has been a constant source of inspiration over many years.*

*Thank you and may God bless you with His peace!*





## One **Introduction: The God Who Rules the Nations**

What sort of book is Daniel? To many, it's a children's Bible story, relating the exciting account of Daniel in the Lion's Den. In our English Old Testament, it's classified as a book of Prophecy, while in the Hebrew Bible it is included among "The Writings," along with Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Esther, Ezra, Nehemiah, Ruth, Song of Songs (aka Song of Solomon), Lamentations, and 1 and 2 Chronicles. This latter classification comes as a surprise to many Christians who have never considered Daniel to be anything other than a book of prophecy. But there are good reasons for thinking of the book in both ways.

The first part of Daniel (chapters 1-6) is similar to some of the other "Writings," especially to Esther, Ezra, and Nehemiah. Like those books, Daniel relates the biographical accounts of a young man taken captive when Jerusalem first fell to the Babylonians in 605 B.C.<sup>1</sup> But the second part of Daniel (7-12) reminds us more of

---

1. See 2 Kings 24:1-2. Daniel was among the first group of captives deported to Babylon. Another deportation occurred in 587-586 B.C., when Jerusalem and the Temple were finally destroyed by the Babylonians.

prophetic books such as Jeremiah or Ezekiel, because it contains visions which Daniel received foretelling events far beyond his own time.<sup>2</sup>

So to say the least, Daniel is a rather odd book, not easy to classify. But what is this odd book about?

### *A Book About History*

The story of Daniel isn't a timeless fairy tale that starts, "Once upon a time there was a man named Daniel." Rather, it begins with a precise historical reference: "In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, came to Jerusalem and besieged it." As noted earlier, that was in 605 B.C., the year Daniel became a captive and the year Judah's Babylonian Exile began. Another precise historical reference is found in Daniel 1:21, which says Daniel was in Babylon until 536 B.C., "the first year of King Cyrus," accurately noting a shift from Babylonian to Persian rulers, which is well documented from other sources in addition to Daniel. Daniel 2:1 refers to "the second year of the reign of Nebuchadnezzar, and Daniel 7:1 mentions "the first year of Belshazzar, one of Nebuchadnezzar's successors,<sup>3</sup> who began his reign in approximately 556 B.C.<sup>4</sup> And there are several other similar historical references in Daniel.

---

2. It should be noted that the first six chapters of Daniel are written in third person, as a narrator tells the stories of Daniel and his friends. But chapters 7-12 contain first-person accounts of the visions Daniel saw, told in his own words.

3. In chapter 5 Nebuchadnezzar is called Belshazzar's "father," evidently in the sense of "predecessor," since Belshazzar's actual father was Nabonidus. It does not seem that Belshazzar and Nebuchadnezzar were physically related.

4. The dating of Belshazzar's reign is problematic, since he was not, as far as the sources tell us, the actual "king" of Babylon. Rather, he was a co-regent in his father's absence. For some reason it seems that Nabonidus preferred to live away from Babylon (exiled?) for a period of about ten years, but never abdicated the throne, and it is unclear when Belshazzar actually began to reign in his father's place. As a result, various dates for Belshazzar's "first year" will sometimes be given.



So, it is clear that the book is offered as a historical record, not a fictional account, and that Daniel was an actual person who lived at a precise point in history – that is, the 6<sup>th</sup> Century B.C.. In Matthew 24:15, Jesus refers to “the abomination of desolation spoken of by the prophet Daniel,” indicating that our Lord regarded Daniel as an actual person of history.<sup>5</sup> Likewise, Hebrews 11:33 refers to faithful believers of old who “stopped the mouths of lions,” an obvious reference to Daniel, which would be meaningless if he were not an actual person.

Daniel is definitely a book about history and should be read that way, not as the story of a legendary character who never actually existed.

### ***A Book About Survival***

Those stories in Daniel about the Lions' Den and the Fiery Furnace aren't just to show the courage of Daniel and his three friends in exile, although they certainly do that. But even more, they describe the challenge of surviving, both physically and spiritually, in a hostile spiritual environment. Daniel and his fellow exiles lived in a polytheistic pagan society that had no respect for their monotheistic Israelite faith, an environment that often made demands on them that their faith would not allow them to meet.

One reason Daniel is such an important book for us today is that we face that same challenge. Although we (in the U.S., at least) are not exiled from our homeland, we nevertheless live in a society in which believers in Christ are far outnumbered by people who reject our faith. We are not as much of a minority as the Israelites were in Babylon, but the opposition is growing at an alarming rate. So while

---

5. Jesus' words also establish that Daniel was indeed a prophet, which may account for the inclusion of his book among the Prophets in Christian Bibles, rather than among “The Writings,” as in the Hebrew Bible.

we are not faced with the same struggles as those faced by Daniel and his friends – at least not yet – we are nevertheless faced with the struggle to survive faithfully. Like Daniel, our challenge is how to be a minority of faith amid a majority of unbelief.

### *A Book About Faithfulness*

The need for faithfulness goes naturally with the challenge of survival in a hostile spiritual environment, since there is no way to survive in faith if we are not faithful to the beliefs and lifestyle standards which God has set before us in Scripture. One of the greatest spiritual fallacies of our time is the belief that we can hold our faith simply as a matter of private opinion, with no need to openly declare it or do anything that might reveal our identity as followers of Christ, and still be okay with God. This is exactly the opposite of what Jesus said: “Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters.”<sup>6</sup> And, “So everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven, but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven.”<sup>7</sup>

The first six chapters of Daniel are about making the decision to be faithful, no matter what the cost. Psalms 137:1-4 reflects the challenge of doing this as a minority of faith, words which refer to the same period of captivity that Daniel experienced:

*By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and wept,  
When we remembered Zion.  
On the willows, there we hung up our lyres.*

---

6. Matthew 12:30. See also Peter’s instructions to “always be prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you,” which implies that we will, either by our words or by our conduct, give unbelievers a reason to ask.

7. Matthew 10:32-33.

*For there our captors required of us songs,  
and our tormentors, mirth, saying,  
“Sing us one of the songs of Zion!”  
How shall we sing the LORD’s song in a foreign land?*

The LORD’s song was intended for worshiping the LORD, and that was to be done primarily in the Temple, something no longer possible in Babylon (or anywhere, for that matter, since the Temple was no more). So how could God’s people possibly sing the “Songs of Zion” while captive in a strange land? And how could they do so on command from their captors? How could they maintain and re-establish their faith in such a vile context of unbelief?

Learning to sing the LORD’s song in a foreign land is exactly the challenge facing Christians in our own time. As the old song says, “This world is not my home” (Philippians 3:20), so we have to figure out how to navigate the troubled waters of unbelief until Jesus comes again to take us home.

This can be a difficult and sometimes complicated undertaking, as Daniel’s book makes clear. But one thing is certain: It will not happen without faithfulness. And Daniel helps us see what faithfulness looks like, even when lived out “by the waters of Babylon.”<sup>8</sup>

### ***A Book About the Future***

Something interesting happens at the beginning of Daniel 7. As noted above, the book shifts from being a third-person narrative *about* Daniel to a series of visions revealed *to* Daniel and reported *by* Daniel. These visions concerned events that would happen in the future – centuries in the future – concerning the rise and fall of kingdoms that were not yet in existence. So precisely told are these

---

8. See 1 Peter 1:1, 17, 2:11, where Christians living in an environment toxic to their faith are likewise referred to as “exiles.”

events, which are now documented history, that many scholars don't believe they could have been written by Daniel in the 6<sup>th</sup> Century B.C., but rather that they must have been written in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century B.C., long after Daniel's time and after the events he records. Naturally, many who take such a view of Daniel do not believe in the reality of predictive prophecy, that God actually revealed to His servants things that would happen far in the future, and many of them reject any concept of the inspiration of the Bible.<sup>9</sup>

The visions of this portion of Daniel even foretell the coming of "One like a son of man... who was given dominion and glory and a kingdom... an everlasting kingdom which shall not pass away" (7:13-14). As we will learn when we reach this part of Daniel, this can be nothing other than a preview of the coming and everlasting reign of Jesus, the Son of God. Because of his faithfulness, Daniel was allowed to see far beyond his own time. Part of living and surviving by faith is to be able to look past the present moment and see what can and will be in a future that is controlled by God. This is what Christian hope is all about. Daniel's visions give us a glimpse of that future.

### ***Above All, a Book About God***

There is no question that, although the book is named after Daniel, it is God who is actually the central character. All of the action of the book depends on His actions, His gifts, His punishments, His revelations, and His intervention.

One of the main reasons this book is so important for us today is that it is a vivid reminder that, no matter what happens, God is in control.<sup>10</sup> Three times the book says, "the Most High rules the

---

9. It should be noted, however, that there are believing scholars who think Daniel is a 2<sup>nd</sup>-Century B.C. work based on linguistic and other factors, not on the rejection of any belief in predictive prophecy or of inspiration.

10. "What impresses the reader above everything else ... is how God-centered Daniel

kingdom of men and gives it to whom he will" (4:25 and 32; 5:21). This is in a very real sense the thematic statement of the book: *God rules*. The rise and fall of various empires in the book of Daniel illustrates this fact. Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians (Chaldeans); Babylon fell to the Medes and the Persians; the Persians fell to the Greeks; and the Greeks fell before the might of Rome. And God oversaw all of it. In addition to this overt statement of God's sovereign rule over human kingdoms, even a pagan such as Nebuchadnezzar says, "Truly, your God is God of gods and LORD of kings, and a revealer of mysteries" (2:47). And in Daniel 4:3 that same king declares, "How great are his signs, how mighty his wonders! His kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and his dominion endures from generation to generation."

We should add that the rule of God over the affairs of men isn't always obvious. Sometimes it is even very subtle, so much so that those who are experiencing it in the moment may not even be aware of God's superintendence. You and I may not see God's hand directly, but He is there, and all that happens, while it may not be God's *ultimate will*, it is under His *ultimate control*. It is all part of a larger plan toward which God is moving human history. Daniel was certain of that, and we should be, too.

It may at times even appear that God has lost in the struggle of good against evil. The first two verses of Daniel 1 readily admit that Nebuchadnezzar was able to sack Jerusalem, God's holy city, and even carry off some of the vessels from the house of God which were used for His worship. And what did Nebuchadnezzar do with them? He "brought them to the land of Shinar, to the house of his god, and placed the vessels in the treasury of his god." Why? Because these Temple vessels were trophies of his victory over Israel and – in his mind at least – the victory of "his god" (Bel) over

---

is and how God-centered is his view of the political stage on which he plays his part" (Sinclair B. Ferguson, *The Preacher's Commentary: Daniel* [Thomas Nelson, 1988], p. 13).

Israel's God. It was as if to say, "My god is bigger and stronger than your god! If not, why was I able to ransack his temple and defeat his people?"

But notice carefully verse 2: "The Lord *gave* Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand, with some of the vessels of the house of God." He *allowed* this to happen. Second Kings 24:1-4 says He not only allowed it, but *caused* it to happen.<sup>11</sup> Why? To punish Judah for being so negligent about keeping the covenant He had made with them. The defeat of Judah at the hands of Babylon wasn't what God ultimately wanted, but it was what *needed to happen* at that point in history to accomplish God's larger purpose. It wasn't God's ultimate will, but it most certainly was His immediate will. So what looked like a defeat of Israel's God was actually the nations doing His bidding. Then He overthrew *them*!

Daniel's message is, "The Most High rules!" And we need to remember that when things seem to be going wrong in the world. God *still* rules!

There was an even greater time when it looked as if God had lost out to evil: when His own Son died for the sins of the world. To all appearances it seemed to the Jews and the Romans and Satan himself – and even to most of Jesus' own followers (Luke 24:21-27) – that evil had triumphed in the worst possible way. Surely God had been defeated in this horrible event. But just as in Daniel's time, this apparent defeat was all part of God's plan, and the resurrection followed close behind it. Then it became evident that God truly had been in control all the time.

The question for us is, do we trust that God who rules the nations?

---

11. "Surely this came upon Judah at the command of the LORD, to remove them out of his sight...." Jeremiah 25:9 calls Nebuchadnezzar God's "servant" to bring destruction on Judah. See also Habakkuk 1:5-6, where God responds to the prophet's complaint over Judah's wicked behavior by assuring him that he is "raising up the Chaldeans" to punish them.

Who stopped the mouths of lions? Who saved His faithful from a fiery furnace? Who raises up rulers and brings them down according to His will? The God who rules over even death itself, and who promises us eternal life!



### For Further Study & Reflection

1. Read Daniel 1:1-2 and 2 Kings 24:1-4. What reason does 2 Kings give for the siege and eventual capture of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar? Why are the historical references in Daniel important? What do they tell us?
2. In addition to Daniel, what other Old Testament accounts can you think of that illustrate the survival of God's people in a hostile spiritual environment? What is the purpose of such accounts for us today?
3. Read 1 Peter 1:1-2, 1:17-19, 2:11-12; James 1:1. In what sense are Christians in the same position as Daniel and his friends? In what ways is our situation different from theirs?
4. From reading Daniel 1, how many times does the chapter say that "God gave" something to someone? What did He give, and to whom? What point is the writer making by saying this?
5. Read Psalms 137. What does this Psalm reveal about the emotions of at least some who were taken captive to Babylon? Do you think this reflects Daniel's feelings as well? Why or why not?
6. Explain this statement: "The Most High rules the kingdom of men and gives it to whom he will" (Daniel 4:25, 32, 5:21). Why is this an important statement in the story of Daniel? Why is it important for us to remember today?
7. Explain the difference between God's "immediate will" (what He wants/allows to happen now) *vs.* His "ultimate will" (His long-range plans). How are both aspects of His will present in the book of Daniel? What other biblical examples can you think of where God allowed things to happen that were not His "ultimate will"?