

**GOD REIGNS OVER ALL:  
LESSONS FROM THE BOOK OF DANIEL**

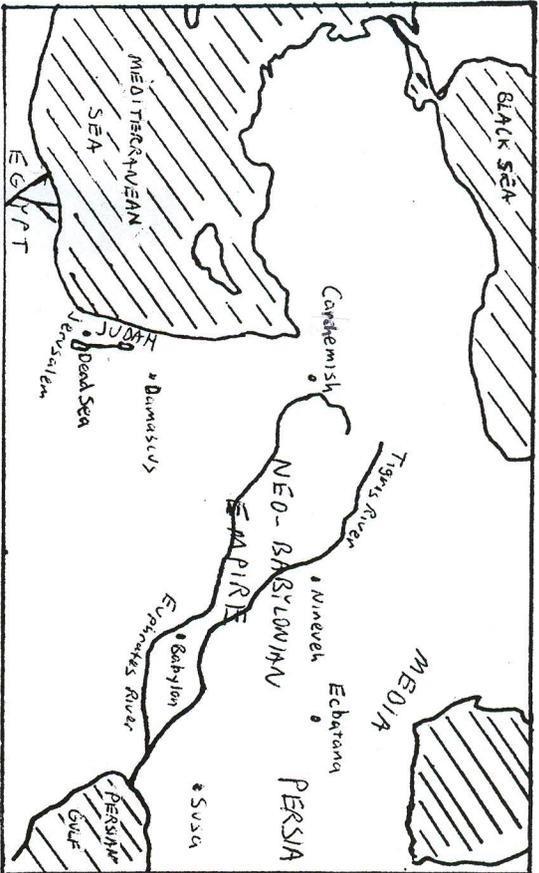
**APPENDIX B: THE PROPHECIES IN DANIEL 2 AND DANIEL 7**

Daniel 2	Daniel 7	Nation	Notes
<p>Head of Gold (2:32, 37-38)</p>	<p>Lion With Wings of an Eagle (7:4)</p>	<p>Babylon</p>	<p>In 612 BC, Babylon established its supremacy by defeating Assyria. For a short while (until 538 BC) Babylon was the most dominant power seen in history up to that time. Then they fell suddenly (as the lion had its wings torn off). The Jews lived under Babylonian rule for the 70 years prophesied by Jeremiah.</p>
<p>Chest &amp; Arms of Silver (2:32, 39)</p>	<p>Bear Raised Up on One Side, Ribs in its Mouth (7:5)</p>	<p>Persia (and its ally Media)</p>	<p>In 538 BC, the Persians and their allies, the Medes, conquered Babylon. The Medes were the weaker power (which is why the bear is lopsided) and soon lost any influence. The Persians tried for many years to conquer the Greeks, at first making great progress, but after defeats at Marathon (490 BC) and Thermopylae and Salamis (480 BC), they had to go over to the defensive. The Jews lived under Persian rule for over 200 years.</p>
<p>Belly &amp; Thighs of Bronze (2:32, 39)</p>	<p>Leopard With Four Wings &amp; Four Heads (7:6)</p>	<p>Greece</p>	<p>The Greeks gradually achieved superiority over Persia, despite their internal disunity and fighting, and when they finally united under Macedonian rule, they were able to conquer Persia in a series of decisive campaigns by Alexander the Great. After he became king in 336 BC, it took only six years for him to conquer the entire Persian Empire. In 332 BC he took Jerusalem, and the Jews came under Greek rule. At Alexander's death, his kingdom was divided into several Hellenistic kingdoms, one or the other of which ruled the Jews until the Jews achieved independence in 142 BC.</p>
<p>Legs of Iron, Feet of Iron Mixed With Clay (2:33, 40-43)</p>	<p>Terrifying Iron-Toothed Beast With Ten Horns (7:7-8)</p>	<p>Rome</p>	<p>Rome was a military state that rose to power through a lengthy series of wars. After the Punic Wars against Carthage in the 3rd century BC, it became clear that Rome had acquired superpower status. In 146 BC, the Romans destroyed Carthage and also completed their subjugation of the Greeks when they destroyed ancient Corinth. The Jews came under Roman rule in 63 BC. Rome was, in earlier times, a kingdom and a republic, and became an empire when Augustus Caesar declared himself emperor in 30 BC (ratified by the Roman Senate in 27 BC).</p>

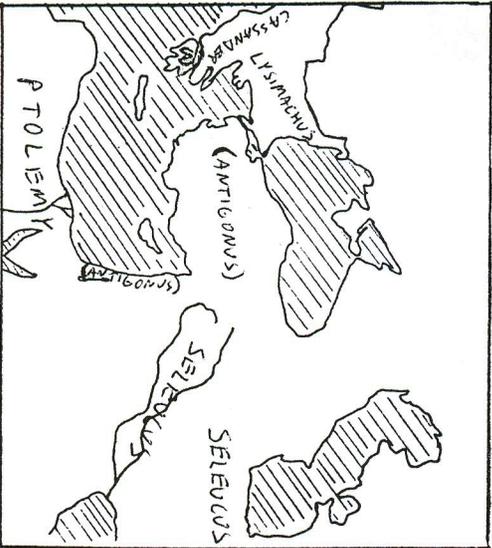
**GOD REIGNS OVER ALL:  
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**MAPS**

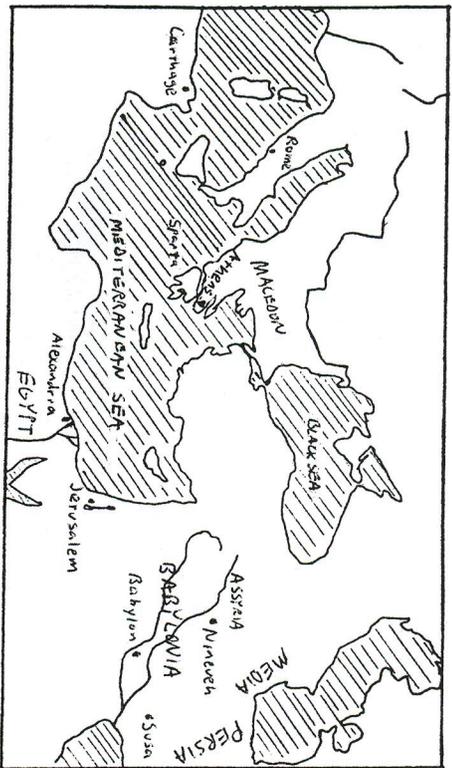
**Map A: The Near East in Daniel's Lifetime**



**Map B: The Diadochi Kingdoms**



**Map C: Cities of the Ancient Mediterranean World**



- Mark Garner, Northland Church Of Christ, 1999

# **GOD REIGNS OVER ALL: LESSONS FROM THE BOOK OF DANIEL**

## **Introduction To Daniel, With Background & Bibliography**

### *Purpose & Themes of Daniel*

The book of Daniel was written primarily to express and illustrate God's control over the universe. In it, we see God defeat numerous pretenders to his throne. We see empires and nations come and go, as God remains in control. We see human leaders and rulers exalt themselves, only to see God bring them low. We see forces such as human wisdom, human activity, and human righteousness exposed as frauds before God's reign and judgment.

The book of Daniel is a great comfort to those of us who love God and want to see him glorified. It provides us with faith-building material that can strengthen our desire and determination to allow nothing to take God's place in our lives and in the lives of others. At the same time, Daniel is a challenge to those, whether unbelievers or believers, who foolishly put their confidence in human wisdom, human strength, or human authority. Daniel provides little comfort for those who trust in the things of this world more than they trust in the living God.

When studying Daniel, it helps to keep the purpose of the book always in mind. Whether Daniel recounts an even in his life, or whether he describes a vision he received from God, he is using it to emphasize to us that God reigns over all. God reigns over past, present, and future. He reigns over nature, humans, and angels. He reigns over human history and he reigns over the spiritual realms. These are the main themes of Daniel, all of which expand on his basic purpose.

### *Overview of Daniel: Narrative Section & Prophetic Section*

Daniel is somewhat unusual in that it has two very different halves to it. The first six chapters are a series of straightforward narratives, while the last six contain a variety of detailed prophecies, so complex that even Daniel struggled to discern the meaning of some. The stories in the first six chapters are so easy to understand that several of them are among the most popular children's Bible stories, while some of the prophecies in the last six chapters contain details that Bible scholars have debated for decades without agreement. But the book is nevertheless a unified whole, because both parts of it teach the same message, that God reigns over all. The extraordinary variety of material that Daniel uses to illustrate this is a testimony to how broad and complete God's reign is.

Note: It is in large part because of the two very different halves of Daniel that some biblical scholars often feel justified in hypothesizing that the book was actually not written by a historical Daniel at all, but was pieced together in his name many centuries after the fact. The most popular liberal theory is that it was written in the Maccabean period. Their theories overlook many of the basic features of Daniel, in particular its unified message and purpose, in which each chapter plays an important role. The sources in the Bibliography discuss this further.

The book of Daniel begins by setting the basic situation, historical and spiritual. In chapter 1, we are introduced to Daniel and his three friends, four faithful servants of God who are captured by the Babylonians and taken to Babylon to serve the pagan king Nebuchadnezzar. In this situation they are faced, right from the start, with a constant choice: do they remain completely faithful to

what God had taught them, or do they please their new human rulers? Despite this tension, we see right away how God is with them and is preparing to work through them. The initial chapter sets the tone for the theme of the book - who is reigning? The four young men never forget that it is God who truly reigns, despite what humans may think or want.

The next five chapters continue both the content and style of chapter one. In chapters 2 through 6, we read of several incidents from the years that Daniel and his friends were captives. In each situation, we see challenges to God's reign and authority, and each time we see God demonstrate that he is in control, regardless of whether humans choose to accept or acknowledge it as they should. These chapters establish God's control in several basic yet important areas, and they also set the stage for the second part of the book, which is more purely prophetic. As part of this plan, there are a couple occasions in the first part of the book where we see glimpses of the kinds of prophecies that will be the dominant material in the last portion of Daniel.

In chapter two, we read of the dream King Nebuchadnezzar had, which no one except Daniel could interpret. His dream is also an important prophecy. In chapter three, Daniel's three friends are forced to choose between worshiping an idol or risking death at the hands of an outraged king. In chapter four, Nebuchadnezzar pays a humiliating price for his pride. In chapter five, the "writing on the wall" signifies judgment that has come on the Babylonians. In chapter six, the new Medo-Persian ruler throws Daniel to the lions, and learns a familiar lesson.

As we study through the first six chapters, we should be alert for themes and lessons that fit in with the purpose of Daniel. In these chapters, God is shown to reign over many forces and many aspects of our lives, while many pretenders are shown to be powerless next to God. These chapters both encourage the faithful believer who is trying to trust fully in God, by showing the powerful ways that God reigns, and also convict the materialist, the doubter, and the skeptic of the futility of putting hope or trust anywhere other than God.

The style and content both change beginning in chapter 7, but the main message remains the same. Chapters 7 through 12 contain some of the most important, most interesting, and most misunderstood prophecies in the Old Testament. The prophecies in these chapters reveal an overall plan that God has for his kingdom, and they show in detail how God will use the great nations and empires of the world as part of that plan. These chapters incidentally contain a great irony: that the humans who try the hardest to rule their own world and their own lives can be the very ones whom God uses to implement his plans. In these prophecies, we see how God's kingdom renders meaningless all the kingdoms of humans, and how God's will triumphs over human will.

Chapter seven is a more detailed version of the Nebuchadnezzar's dream, a parade of human empires that will all be humbled and replaced by God's kingdom. The vision reveals God's absolute control over human history. Chapter eight is a prophecy about a key era in (then) future history, the conflict between the Persians and the Greeks, which had important implications for God's people. Chapter nine gives us a look at God's plans for his people, in particular looking ahead to the coming of the Messiah. Chapter ten shows us Daniel's response to all of these visions, and teaches important lessons about awe. Chapter eleven is an extended prophecy about the period of Greek domination that lay ahead in the history of God's people. Finally, chapter twelve concludes the book with images of judgment and perseverance.

## ***Historical Background - Introduction***

Daniel's book contains many historical references and many historical prophecies. With any prophetic book, understanding the historical background is vital to correct interpretation, and with Daniel this is particularly true. For now, we shall look at the background to the beginning of the book. As we proceed, we shall cover additional historical material as it pertains to each chapter of Daniel.

The book begins in the declining years of the kingdom of Judah, the Southern Kingdom, or the southern half of God's people after the split that occurred after King Solomon's death in 931 BC (see 1 Kings 12). The Northern Kingdom, which retained the name Israel but which was often called Samaria, was spiritually dead for practically its entire existence, and was conquered by the Assyrian Empire in 722 BC (see 2 Kings 17). Meanwhile, Judah, where Daniel grew up, experienced a recurring cycle in which periods of spiritual reform were followed by decline and blatant unspirituality, then followed by another dramatic reform, followed by more decline.

For years, God had patiently endured this interminable cycle, and endured their idols and their half-hearted worship of him. In the reign of the great reformer King Josiah (640 BC-609 BC), God gave them one final chance, as Josiah had all the zeal necessary to inspire anyone who truly wanted a spiritual awakening. But after Josiah's death, the nation quickly forgot all his reforms, and God prepared severe discipline. Josiah's personal purity and zeal did not change the hard hearts around him. (Nor could the earlier reformer kings, such as Asa and Hezekiah.) He is an example to those who think that strong human leadership is all that is needed to turn the church around. Each human must decide in his or her own heart whether to follow God.

Meanwhile, to the east, the nation of Babylon was growing into a powerful empire. Many centuries earlier, Babylon had been a world power, in the days of Hammurabi (whose legacy was his famous legal code). That had been not long after Abraham's lifetime, over 1000 years before Daniel's day. Now, in the 7th century BC, many Babylonians were feeling that it was time for their nation to regain its lost greatness. Thus, while Josiah was trying desperately to bring Judah back to God, king Nabopolassar was leading Babylon into a death struggle with the powerful, cruel, but rapidly decaying Assyrian empire, which God had used a century previously to discipline and deport the northern half of his unfaithful people. Assyria and Babylon were ancient enemies, and fought bitterly with each other, never realizing that their own ambitions were vain and irrelevant. The only thing that mattered in all their wars and plotting was the way that God would use them as a small part of his eternal plans. After God finished with them, they disappeared into history's wastebasket.

Babylon did succeed in destroying the Assyrians by 612 BC, and immediately turned to attack her other neighbors - among them the small kingdom of Judah, which lay in the path of Babylon's main objective, Egypt. For the rest of Judah's existence as a nation, she tried to manipulate Egypt and Babylon, trying to get some kind of advantage from the twisted desire of those two powers to fight each other. The last four kings of Judah were weak, ill-intentioned nonentities whose political games only succeeded in antagonizing the two powers. The beginning of the end came in 605 BC, when Babylon launched a punitive raid in the areas around Jerusalem, ravaging the land, looting the temple, and capturing a group of young Jewish men to serve as slaves. In the same year of 605 BC, crown prince Nebuchadnezzar - who became king a year later - led Babylon to victory over Egypt in the famous and decisive battle of Carchemish.

In this first group of Judean captives were Daniel and his three friends, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. In Judah they had been privileged, of noble birth, and well educated. In Babylon they were forced to take new names, forced to adapt themselves to new habits, and forced to serve the king who had ravaged their homeland. They and the others in this group would be the first to face the dilemmas of captivity that many thousands of Jews would soon face in the years ahead. Two additional and much larger groups of captives would be brought to Babylon: one in 597 BC, and a final one in 586 BC when Jerusalem was sacked, eliminating Judah as an independent country. These captives began the long and difficult process of spiritually renewing God's people. They had wanted to be like the other nations, and no longer desired to be special people chosen by God and subject to him, so God simply handed them over to the nations they so admired.

### ***Bibliography***

#### A) Commentaries on Daniel:

Gleason L. Archer, Jr, *Daniel (in Expositor's Bible Commentary, volume 7)*  
Joyce Baldwin, *Daniel: An Introduction & Commentary (Tyndale OT)*  
James Burton Coffman, *Daniel (The Believer's Commentary)*  
Jim McGuiggan, *The Book of Daniel*  
W. Sibley Towner, *Daniel (Interpretation Commentaries)*  
Ronald Wallace, *The Message of Daniel (Bible Speaks Today series)*

Note: Each of these books has a different perspective, different strengths, and different weaknesses.

#### B) Ancient Historians:

Herodotus, *Histories*  
Josephus, *The Antiquity of the Jews*  
Josephus, *The Wars of the Jews*  
Livy, *Ab Urbe Condita*  
Polybius, *Histories*  
Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*  
Xenophon, *Hellenica*  
Xenophon, *Anabasis*

Herodotus's histories cover Daniel's own lifetime. Livy covers Roman history, while Polybius is concerned with the period when Rome rose to power (264-146 BC). Thucydides and Xenophon cover the period of Greek history prior to Alexander.

#### C) Other Suggested References on Ancient History:

Boardman, Murray, Griffin, *The Oxford History of Greece & the Hellenistic World*  
Jacob Burckhardt, *The Greeks & Greek Civilization*  
Michael Coogan (ed.), *The Oxford History of the Biblical World*  
Will & Ariel Durant, *The Story of Civilization, Vol. 1: Our Oriental Heritage*  
Will & Ariel Durant, *The Story of Civilization, Vol. 2: The Life of Greece*

Will & Ariel Durant, *The Story of Civilization, Vol. 3: Caesar & Christ*  
Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*  
John Garraty & Peter Gay, *The Columbia History of the World*  
H. Kinder & W. Hilgemann, *The Anchor Atlas of World History, (volume 1)*  
Murray, Boardman, Griffin, *The Oxford History of the Classical World*

Some of the many useful available sources on ancient history, recommended for completeness and/or readability. There are many good books on Greece and Rome, but fewer non-technical works on other ancient civilizations such as Babylon and Persia, which are prominent in Daniel. Except for those whose titles suggest one particular focus, these works have a broad emphasis. Note that the Coogan book is a historical work, whose authors generally do not believe in the complete accuracy of the Bible. Many of their conclusions reflect this, but the book is still useful for the historical information on the surrounding nations.

### ***Questions - For Discussion or Further Study***

- 1) How would the theme of Daniel, "God reigns over all", challenge or teach an unbeliever? How would it challenge or teach a Christian?
- 2) Look over the events covered in the first six chapters of Daniel. In what ways would you expect them to illustrate the theme of God reigning over all?
- 3) Look over the subjects of the prophecies in Daniel 7-12. In what ways would you expect these chapters to illustrate the theme of God reigning over all? Can you see any connections between the material in the first half of Daniel and the material in the second half?

- *Mark Garner, Northland Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, 1999*

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**CHRONOLOGY**

This chronology includes events of Daniel's lifetime, events prophesied about by Daniel, and other selected events of biblical or world historical interest.

722 BC	Assyria conquers the Northern Kingdom (Samaria, or Israel)
640 BC	Josiah becomes king of Judah
626 BC	Nabopolassar founds Neo-Babylonian Empire
612 BC	Babylonians and Medes conquer Nineveh (Assyria's capital)
609 BC	Josiah dies in battle; succeeded by Jehoahaz, then Jehoiakim
606 BC	First captives taken to Babylon, including Daniel & his friends
605 BC	Battle of Carchemish - Babylon routs Egypt
604 BC	Nebuchadnezzar becomes ruler of Babylon
598 BC	Jehoiakim dies; Jehoiachin becomes king of Judah
597 BC	Second group of captives taken to Babylon (includes Ezekiel)
597 BC	Jehoiachin deposed; Zedekiah becomes last king of Judah
586 BC	Jerusalem falls in the third Babylonian invasion
561 BC	Nebuchadnezzar dies; in next 6 years four kings are killed
555 BC	Nabonidus becomes last king of Babylon
553 BC	Nabonidus makes his son Belshazzar regent of Babylon
550 BC	Cyrus "the Great" becomes ruler of Persia
538 BC	Persians & Medes conquer Babylon
536 BC	Cyrus decrees that the Jews can return to their homeland
529 BC	Cyrus dies, his son Cambyses becomes ruler
521 BC	Darius I ("the Great") Hystaspes becomes ruler of Persia
520 BC	Haggai & Zechariah exhort the Jews to rebuild the temple
516 BC	Final temple construction completed
490 BC	Persia invades Greece; Athenians defeat them at Marathon
486 BC	Xerxes ("Ahasuerus") becomes ruler of Persia
480 BC	Greeks defeat Persians in battles of Thermopylae & Salamis
478 BC	Esther becomes Queen of Persia
465 BC	Xerxes assassinated; succeeded by Artaxerxes I
458 BC	Ezra's reforms & teachings
444 BC	Nehemiah (Artaxerxes's cupbearer) rebuilds Jerusalem's walls
431 BC	Peloponnesian War begins in Greece between Athens & Sparta
420 BC	Approximate date of Malachi, last book of O.T. to be written
404 BC	Peloponnesian War ends in victory for Sparta
399 BC	Socrates executed in Athens
359 BC	Philip II becomes king of Macedon
338 BC	Philip completes unification of Greece
336 BC	Alexander The Great becomes ruler of Greece
333 BC	Alexander's victory at Issus seriously weakens the Persians
332 BC	Alexander conquers Jerusalem

331 BC	Alexander defeats Persians at Gaugmela; ends their empire
330 BC	Alexander conquers remaining Persian territories
323 BC	Alexander dies at age 33
303 BC	Antigonus's kingdom dismembered; Seleucus takes Israel
301 BC	Ptolemy of Egypt takes Israel from Seleucus
285 BC	Ptolemy Philadelphus begins reign
264 BC	First Punic War begins between Rome & Carthage
241 BC	First Punic War ends in Roman victory
219 BC	Second Punic War begins - Hannibal attacks Romans
202 BC	Second Punic War ends at Zama - crushing win for Rome
198 BC	Seleucid king Antiochus takes Israel, aided by Jews
192 BC	Romans defeat Antiochus III at Thermopylae
191 BC	Romans defeat Antiochus at Magnesium, halting his expansion
175 BC	Antiochus IV "Epiphanes" becomes ruler of Seleucid Empire
167 BC	Maccabean revolt - Jewish war for independence begins
149 BC	Third & final Punic War begins
146 BC	Romans destroy Carthage and Corinth
142 BC	Jews are granted independence by Seleucids
135 BC	John Hyrcanus becomes ruler of the Jews
104 BC	Hyrcanus dies, beginning period of political turmoil
63 BC	Romans conquer Jerusalem
49 BC	Civil War begins in Rome, won by Julius Caesar
44 BC	Julius Caesar assassinated
30 BC	Augustus declares himself first emperor of Rome
27 BC	Roman Senate ratifies Augustus's declaration
4 BC	Birth of Christ (approximate)
AD 14	Tiberius Caesar succeeds Augustus as emperor
AD 29	Public ministries of John the Baptizer & Jesus begin (approximate)
AD 32	Crucifixion of Jesus (approximate)
AD 46	Paul's First Missionary Journey begins (approximate)
AD 64	Great fire in Rome; Nero blames it on Christians
AD 66	Jews revolt against Romans; Romans besiege Jerusalem
AD 70	Romans destroy Jerusalem and disperse the Jews

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## **GOD REIGNS OVER ALL: LESSONS FROM THE BOOK OF DANIEL**

### **Daniel Chapter One: Kingdoms In Conflict**

*The first chapter of the book introduces the first set of trials and adjustments that Daniel and his three companions endured when they were taken captive to Babylon. Even their earliest experiences, before the dramatic events of later chapters, teach us some important lessons.*

#### ***Into Captivity - Daniel 1:1-7***

The first few verses of the book set the situation for us. King Jehoiakim was a son of the great reformer King Josiah, but he had none of his father's spirituality, and he also was lacking in diplomatic skill. He and the rest of Josiah's sad-sack successors let down God's people both spiritually and politically. They antagonized Judah's powerful neighbors, with the result that for the last 23 years of Judah's independent existence, she was constantly threatened with foreign invasion. The invasion described in Daniel 1:1-7 is the first of the three Babylonian invasions, in 606 BC.

To the Babylonians, Judah was not the main objective at all. Babylon viewed Egypt as their main enemy, and only asked of Judah and other small nations that they get out of their way so that they could subdue Egypt, as they had done to Assyria not long before. But Jehoiakim's stubborn independence led him to heed neither prophets like Jeremiah nor powerful rulers like the Babylonians.

The price for poor leadership and spiritual decline was first paid by a small group of captives, including Daniel and his friends.

#### ***Light That Can't Be Hidden - Daniel 1:8-21***

Daniel and the other captives face a situation that, while familiar in many ways to us, they had never faced before. Until this time, the people around them had at least pretended to follow God, and outwardly observed most of the principles that God had taught them. Now they must live amongst an entirely pagan people, who made no pretenses to any kind of morality, righteousness, or religious observance. The four Jews were even required to use new names (Babylonian names, more familiar to the pagans). And yet, God would show that this situation was exactly what he needed to let shine the light that was in the hearts of these young men.

Misguided believers often think that the optimal situation for Christian growth is to be surrounded by "spiritual giants" who will provide unlimited encouragement and direction. This mistaken belief is too often an expression of a desire not to be obligated to make our own efforts to seek out God and his will. But Scripture teaches us that we grow the most when we are surrounded by tests, by trials, by situations in which we don't have any easy answers - these force us to rely on God. And they make our faith much more evident to the world. Light shines most brightly in the darkness!

In Daniel 1, we probably see only a small portion of the changes and decisions these youths had to go through. We see, as one example, the food they were offered by the Babylonians - rich

delicacies that would have violated the dietary directives God had given to his people, and that were probably more of a sensory indulgence than a source of health and strength. Thus the four men of God understand that they must decline to indulge in these foods, and must persuade their guards to permit them to eat a more Spartan, but more appropriate, diet. Soon it becomes clear that these four are healthier than all the rest. Though hardly as dramatic as the things God will do later in the book, it is enough to make the Babylonians take notice that there is something different about these four young men whose God is so important to them. Even in small challenges, faithful believers can draw attention to the importance of God and his will.

God gives them wisdom and understanding as well, and it is not long before the Babylonians (even the king himself) are forced to respect and admire their abilities. God causes them to shine out amongst the pagans - not only for their own good, but because it is important to his plans. If we will set aside our reluctance, and accept the challenges that life offers, God can bring about change in our lives that will both benefit us spiritually, and that will be a needed example of faith to those who know us. If we wish for God to use us, we must be ready and willing for God to send us into situations where we will be forced to rely on him, because these are the situations that are ready-made for God to work through us.

Consider also the ways this situation could have affected their attitudes and their feelings towards God. Most believers find it difficult to retain a strong faith when things have gone wrong, especially if it seems that God has not "won". These men were to see the entire nation of God's people eventually captured and enslaved. And though they were righteous and faithful, they were among the very first to pay the bitter price for their nation's sin. But just as they did with the outward challenges, these young persons met the inner ones with faith and spiritual strength.

This might have been the toughest challenge of all. When we suffer through no fault of our own, and especially when we suffer from someone else's sin, it is very difficult to maintain our faith. It can be possible to blame God, demanding to know why the misfortunes have occurred. It is also easy to develop such resentments towards other persons that it becomes impossible to serve God effectively. Daniel and his three friends are truly Christ-like in their acceptance of a bad situation and their willingness to make the best of it, to use it to shine God's light on others.

### ***Questions for Daniel 1 - For Discussion or Further Study***

- 1) Name some of the external trials and challenges that Daniel and his friends faced from the Babylonians. How did they respond? What other responses could they have had? How are these trials similar to situations faced by Christians? What can we learn from their response?
- 2) Name some of the internal struggles that a faithful believer might have being put into the situation of the captives in Babylon. What would be difficult about the situation, from a spiritual viewpoint? How can we learn from their experience in this respect?

*- Mark Garner, Northland Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, 1999*

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### **Daniel Chapter Two: King Nebuchadnezzar's Prophetic Dream**

*In chapter one, Daniel and his friends went through some challenges, but it was just the beginning. In Daniel 2, we see the first of several direct confrontations between the living God and the pretenders to his throne. In all of these confrontations, God defeats the pretenders, and also reveals their emptiness and impotence. This chapter also contains a simple version of one of the key prophecies in Daniel.*

#### ***We Can't Do it! - Daniel 2:1-12***

Early in his reign as king of Babylon, King Nebuchadnezzar, who is very prominent in Daniel, has had a dream, a dream so thought-provoking that he felt the need to consult all the experts of the kingdom to interpret it for him. So he calls together scholars, astrologers, and many others.

These "experts" we see come forth are really little different from the "experts" in any nation at any time. We must not look at the group of palace astrologers and wise men as some kind of quaint practice with little relevance today. Today's equivalent would be bureaucrats, congressional leaders, university professors, and the like. These persons do have a certain degree of expertise in their limited fields, but then so did the astrologers and other experts in Nebuchadnezzar's court. In both cases, these experts are not worth relying upon for the truly difficult questions. And we must not laugh at the king's reliance on individuals described with these titles. In our own day, we put such a ridiculous faith in human judgment that even public opinion polls, which are in fact utterly useless for discerning the truth, are considered important in determining serious matters.

But on this occasion, the experts are presented with a new twist. Whether out of a suspicion that these experts weren't really all they claimed to be, or whether he really couldn't quite remember the details of the dream, Nebuchadnezzar sets them a task quite different from what they expected: they must not only interpret his dream, they must tell him what it was first. One can almost picture the assembled experts, confidently ready to make up whatever interpretation of the dream seems plausible, only to be confronted suddenly with the expectation that this time they should have a real answer. All of the skills, learning, and trickery of the human experts prove completely inadequate to this request, and all the experts have to offer are excuses. The king's frustration becomes so great that he decides to have them all executed. Two things are notable about this confrontation:

First, we have an illustration of the total inadequacy of worldly wisdom when asked to deal with the tough questions. Remember that no matter how impressive worldly credentials may seem, no matter how many awards, titles, and degrees that humans bestow on one another, none of this changes the absolute inability of human beings to solve any real problems. If such things can't even give an answer to an objective question (what was my dream?), they are completely worthless in bringing forgiveness of sins, a meaning to existence, or other genuinely important needs. Again, we must not make the mistake of laughing off these court astrologers as a silly

ancient practice. They are no more pathetic than the human experts surrounding us who claim to have answers, when they don't even understand or ask the right questions.

Second, study the king's response of disappointment and anger. When we expect human beings or human qualities to do something that only God can do, we will always be disappointed. If you are angry and frustrated with those around you, if you think they should be better at helping you to feel good about yourself, if you are frustrated because your job isn't giving you the feeling of doing something with your life, if you are unhappy because you think you deserve better opportunities or possessions, do not blame other humans or think up conspiracy theories. Blame your own expectations instead. Other humans - even Christians - are not meant to give meaning or direction to your life. Only God can do that. Our responsibility towards each other is to point one another to God, not to try to be God for one another. Further, things such as jobs and possessions are not meant to give you security or lasting significance. Only a relationship with God can do that. When we recognize the deepest needs in our lives, we can only expect that they be filled if we turn to God. Expecting fulfillment from any other source makes disappointment inevitable, but expecting fulfillment from God will bring satisfaction.

### ***The Godly Response to Trouble - Daniel 2:13-28***

Imagine Daniel's feelings the day when the king's guards came to tell him that he was going to be executed because of the inability of the other "wise men" to interpret the king's dream. Most persons, even many Christians, react to injustices much more minor than this with a great deal of self-pity, self-righteousness, or anger. We can learn a great deal from how Daniel handles this situation, because Daniel understood that situations such as this are great opportunities for God to act. He did not have the self-centered attitude that this was unfair, or that he shouldn't have to put up with such a problem. He did not complain, make accusations, or doubt. In reading over this section, make sure to notice the following features of Daniel's godly response:

First, notice his self-control. He realizes at once how little control he has over the situation, so he knows he must keep control over his emotions. God did not give you the ability to control events, but he did give you a Spirit that enables you to control yourself. Most persons, if put in Daniel's situation, would waste valuable time and energy in manipulative pleading or anger, self-centered moping, resentful complaining, or other ugly emotions. Daniel simply puts his faith in God and does only those things that allow God to work as he sees fit. Daniel does not decide in advance what God "should" or "has to" do. Too many Christians do that, and then decide whether or not God loves them by whether God fulfills their own fleshly goals.

Next, notice that Daniel accepts the fact that he doesn't know what to do. Too many of us panic and give in to despair when faced with a situation to which we have no answers. Don't despise such situations, but be grateful for them. Even if you thought you knew what to do, you'd likely be wrong anyway - so be glad when you are able clearly to see how little control or influence you have over events. These situations are the best opportunities you will have for spiritual growth. Note what Daniel does first of all - he prays, and asks his friends to pray. He wastes no time trying to force himself to come up with answers. He does not consume his energy in useless, confusing activity. Remember this when you face serious problems - admitting you have no answers is not a defeat, it is the beginning of victory. God has answers waiting for you

if you ask - don't miss them.

Then, notice how he genuinely gives the credit to God. Too often we say the same kinds of words that Daniel uses without having the same heart. Daniel is actually excited that God can do what he can't do himself. When we say these things, it ought to be with this same feeling - not with the falsely humble sense of despair or inadequacy that many Christians have in their hearts when they "give the credit to God". The right heart is more important than the right words. Having a relationship with God does not mean spending the rest of our lives apologizing for not having the answers. It means spending our lives praising the God who does know everything.

This is an interesting contrast between Daniel and Arioch, the commander of the king's guard. Arioch wants to get a little credit himself (v. 25) simply by being the one who brought Daniel to the king. His claim to have found Daniel himself is amusing, but not much different from our own desire to take credit for things which were truly none of our own doing.

### ***The Dream and its Interpretation - Daniel 2:29-49***

Now we learn about the king's dream itself. The dream is actually an important prophecy - so important that it is repeated, in much more detail, in a vision that God gave to Daniel himself in chapter 7. Here, the vision is not a complicated one. The king saw a great statue in the shape of a human, with each part of the statue consisting of a different material. The statue's head was made of gold, its chest and arms were silver, its torso and thighs were bronze, and its legs were iron. The statue's feet were also iron, but they were of iron that was mixed together with clay. As the king watched the statue, a rock, not cut by human hands, struck the statue at its vulnerable point - its feet. With the feet smashed, the rest of the statue shattered as well, and its dust scattered in the wind. Meanwhile, the rock that destroyed the statue grew into a mountain filling the whole earth.

Daniel explains that the statue represents a series of great empires, beginning with the then current Babylonian empire (symbolized by the head of gold). The silver part represents the empire of the Persians and Medes, which in 538 BC under Cyrus the Great conquered and swallowed up the Babylonian empire. (Chapter 2 itself takes place in 603 BC) The Persians would later become involved in extended warfare with the Greeks, and in 331 BC the Greeks led by Alexander the Great would finally conquer and swallow up the Persians. Thus the Greek Empire is represented by the bronze part of the statue. Finally, the Roman Empire would rise, and would swallow up both the Greeks and the remaining parts of the earlier empires - becoming the largest of all these human empires. Rome is represented by iron, but also by feet (foundations) mixed with brittle clay. All these kingdoms are combined in the one statue, because to God they are really little different from one another - they all represent the continuing human desire to seize control of history from God.

The rock "not cut by human hands" is God's kingdom. Daniel reveals that God will powerfully reveal his own kingdom during the time of the iron (Roman) empire. It strikes at the weakest point of the human empires and crushes them, then itself grows into a mountain that fills the whole earth. Most of the symbolism here is obvious, but make sure to notice everything in its proper context. The victory of God's kingdom is not a military or political one - rather it crushes

the other kingdoms by exposing them as powerless and irrelevant, from God's eternal perspective. And note that most of the world has not acknowledged this victory, because it did not come on the terms they are used to dealing with, but it has happened all the same. The challenge to Christians is to accept this victory on the same terms - those of faith - by which God won it. Christians who long for victory on the world's terms, whether material, political, or any other, are ignorant of the real purpose of God's creation. Those Christians who accept that the greatest victories are purely spiritual are the ones who will share the deepest joys that God can offer.

When we reach chapter 7, where the more detailed version of this prophecy is given, we shall study in more detail the historical fulfillment of it. For now, think about the basic lesson, which is that God is control of history. The vision in chapter 2 is also noteworthy in that God presented it through Nebuchadnezzar, an idolatrous and violent pagan. Nebuchadnezzar was a sinful man, but to one whom God wished to give an opportunity, because he knew that there was a portion of his heart that wanted to know the truth.

### ***Questions for Daniel 2 - For Discussion or Further Study***

- 1) What kinds of tough questions do today's humans submit to "the experts" as Nebuchadnezzar did? When is it right to put confidence in experts, and when is it a mistake? How could we tell?
- 2) Describe the ways that Daniel deals with the unexpected threat to his life. What kinds of situations can his response help us to deal with?
- 3) Outline the king's dream and the basic interpretation of it. Why would God have revealed such a prophecy to a pagan like Nebuchadnezzar?

- *Mark Garner, Northland Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, 1999*

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## **GOD REIGNS OVER ALL: LESSONS FROM THE BOOK OF DANIEL**

### **Daniel Chapter Three: Victory Over Idolatry**

In chapter two, we saw the first of several powerful lessons that God taught to Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon. At the time, the king was humbled and convicted of God's truth. But he soon forgot the lesson he learned, and provoked a greater confrontation between his fleshly power and the power of God's reign.

#### ***The Practice of Idol Worship - Daniel 3:1-12***

Nebuchadnezzar soon forgot the most important of the lessons that Daniel taught him. Thinking only of the glory he could earn for himself, and perhaps remembering Daniel's description of Babylon as the golden head of the statue, he now decides to create a gigantic idol of gold that everyone in his empire must worship at his bidding. After the idol is set up, whenever he commands the playing of certain music, everyone must stop whatever they are doing to bow down to the idol. The king also decrees in advance that all who disobeyed this were, without delay, to be thrown into a furnace and burned alive.

Thus, all of the Babylonians are periodically forced to interrupt their lives to perform a pointless act, just to indulge the king in his egomania. If they happened to be at work when the music sounded - dum da DAH - they had to get up from their desks, get on the ground, and bow in the direction of the idol. If they were cleaning up the kitchen when the music sounded - dum da DAH - they had to set down their dishes, get on the floor, and bow in the direction of the idol.

At first, it probably felt quite foolish. But after a while, the Babylonians probably did not even think about it; whenever the music played they just bowed down, a reflex they didn't question. After all, everyone else was doing it, and after all, the penalties were too much to risk. These are three of the most powerful weapons of idolatry - habit, peer pressure, and reward or punishment. These can break down the resistance of most persons to even the most worthless idols.

So too, when the world tells us to do something, we may question it a few times, but then just start bowing down without thinking. When we first become Christians, we fight against temptations to lust or envy. But later, we get tired of resisting, and when the slightest opportunity to lust or envy arises - dum da DAH - we give in and make excuses. When we are first Christians, we know that our careers and hobbies are unimportant compared to knowing God, and we are happy spending extra time and energy getting to know God. But later we decide we're "missing out", and all it takes is the least excuse - dum da DAH - to forego studying the Bible so that we can spend "our" spare time in making extra money or serving ourselves at the expense of others.

Most sins can be "excused" because everyone else is doing it. That never makes anything right - even if "everyone else" means Christians. God does not decide right and wrong by majority vote. Once you give any acceptance to the possibility that others' actions are an excuse for your own sins, you have lost the battle. Even if you do avoid the sin involved, it will probably be for

the wrong reasons - "well, I won't do it anyway because people might see me", "it wouldn't be good for me after all", "maybe if I don't do it, God will give me a reward". If God says something is wrong, that should be enough for us.

Though most of Nebuchadnezzar's subjects obeyed, there were three who refused - the three young Hebrew friends of Daniel. Their actions do not go unnoticed, and word quickly gets to the king of their disobedience to him. Some of his "wise men", who of course themselves worshiped his idol, tell him that the three Jews are resisting. Those who themselves do not have the character and strength to do what is right will always resent and fear those who can do the right thing, and will look for a chance to get them in trouble. That is something to remember when you are pressured to worship what the pagans worship. Those that seem most intimidating are actually revealing their own weakness and insecurity.

### ***Standing Firm - Daniel 3:13-27***

A tense confrontation thus occurs between the proud but insecure king, and the humble yet secure young men. The three young men make an impressive showing of faith before the king. But in looking at their faith and reading their bold words, we must realize that it all started with a simple but vital decision: under no circumstances would they bow to an idol. Without that decision made in advance, they would never have stood firm, no matter how much help God offered them.

Shadrach, Meschach, and Abednego (or Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah, their Hebrew names) have already decided that, no matter what, they are not going to give in to the command to worship an idol. Their boldness, their confidence, and the chance they gave God to deliver them, all came from this. When we go into a situation already having decided to do what God has told us, we too will act like this. But when we go into a situation just hoping for the best, wanting to "wait and see" what happens before we decide whether to obey God, that is when we fail - because we have the wrong attitude. Doing what is right is important because it is right, and for no other good reason. Yes, doing the right thing often leads to blessings - but not always. If we only do the right thing to get blessings from God, we are no better than pagans. The worst sinner in the world will do the right thing if he or she expects to get a reward in return.

Note the bold reply to the king in verses 16-18. They are absolutely confident that God can rescue them from the fire, but they don't know if he will. This is a powerful example to us: we so often demand to know whether God will give us what we want before we give him what he wants. We have to learn to accept that whatever he wants is the thing we should want. Too many Christians decide what they want to happen in their lives, and then practically demand that God bring it about, and then call this "faith". Real faith assumes everything about God's abilities, but makes no presumptions that God will act as we wish him to. These men did not believe that their own wills controlled this situation.

All of the above principles are valuable to remember in our own struggles with the idols worshiped around us, the idols of money, popularity, relationships, career, and the rest. A predetermined decision to resist worshiping these things, and the refusal to accept comparisons, rationalizations, or excuses, will enable us to look to God alone for the meaning, hope and joy

that only he is truly able to give.

In this case, it pleased God to deliver them from the fire. Further, the dramatic display of God's power had a great effect on the pagans watching this. But the three youths did not make their decision for these reasons - they knew only that they must do what was right.

The fourth man in the fire, who verse 25 says "looks like a son of the gods", is the subject of much speculation among those who find the description suggestive of Jesus Christ. As attractive as that identification may be, it must be considered merely a possibility and a guess. Since the description is uttered by a pagan, and refers to the son of "gods" (plural), we can only be certain that it was a miraculous appearance of some spiritual being, whether an angel or someone more specific.

### ***A Lesson Learned - Daniel 3:28-30***

In the midst of God's dramatic rescue of his three faithful servants, make sure not to miss the effect on the king. This is now the second time he has seen the living God reveal himself in an unmistakable way. Nebuchadnezzar was a brutal and immoral ruler, and was also hard-headed and stubborn, but part of his heart was open to the truth, and God was willing to take whatever time and means were necessary to soften him a bit at a time. One more lesson, though, was needed, and it was the hardest one of all for this proud and powerful king. We'll read about it in chapter four.

### ***Questions For Daniel 3 - For Discussion or Further Study***

- 1) How do you think the Babylonians felt having constantly to interrupt their lives to worship Nebuchadnezzar's idol? How do humans feel who worship today's idols? How can this help us to know when we may have fallen into idolatry of some type?
- 2) What motivation might the Babylonians have for "turning in" Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego? How is this similar to the pressure we might receive to adopt the world's values?
- 3) What qualities or principles enabled these three to resist the pressure to worship the idol? How can their example help us in resisting the idols that are popular today?
- 4) In what ways was God able to use this situation? In what ways can God use us when we are confronted with pressure to worship idols?

- *Mark Garner, Northland Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, 1999*

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## **GOD REIGNS OVER ALL: LESSONS FROM THE BOOK OF DANIEL**

### **Daniel Chapter Four: Another Lesson For Nebuchadnezzar**

*Until now, the narratives in Daniel have primarily shown us the viewpoint of Daniel and the other captives. Chapter 4 emphasizes, instead, the situation of King Nebuchadnezzar, a person very fortunate in the world's eyes, but one struggling to heed the message God has been sending him.*

#### ***A Tough Lesson - Daniel 4:1-27***

At first glance, this chapter contains a simple story. A proud, haughty king thinks he has earned all his wealth and power by his own deeds and wisdom. But really he has everything only because God has put it into his hands. So God sends judgment on the proud king. After warning him through a dream, he drives the king off his throne and out of his mind. The king lives like a wild beast until he learns humility, and then God lets him return to his kingdom.

That alone would be a story worth careful study. Consider what an impression it would make on the public if the President of the US, the Prime Minister of Britain, or some other important leader, went insane in such a manner. But when we set it into the context of Daniel as a whole, and the ways that Nebuchadnezzar learns about God in particular, we see that there is even more to the account. It is not just a story of a proud man humbled, but of God's loving attempts to reach a person who was a vile sinner, yet who also wanted to know the truth.

Nebuchadnezzar is one of the most interesting characters in the Old Testament. He is a pagan of pagans: a rich, powerful king who got that way by destroying his neighbors. But he is also in his heart a seeker - he consistently shows the willingness to listen to Daniel and the others, and God clearly saw him as worth the time to reach out to. Daniel himself must have had positive feelings about him. Notice what he says in verse 19 when he realizes that the king's dream means bad news. We have already seen that Daniel and his friends never waste time buttering up pagans, so Daniel must have meant what he said.

And God took the time to give Nebuchadnezzar a warning of what was to happen - a warning he did not heed at the time, but one he remembered when it came true. Though he was slow to learn, he did learn the lesson God taught. God does not care as much about how long we take to learn a lesson, as he cares that we do eventually learn the lesson.

God's treatment of Nebuchadnezzar is a good example of him showing grace to someone who, though far from God, was in his heart open to listening. It may seem harsh or punitive that God drove the king from his throne and made him a laughing stock to his subjects, but it is really an expression of grace and love. If the only way for us to learn humility is to be humiliated, God will bring it about. If the only way to get us to be grateful for what we have is to take it away, God can bring it about. This is genuine love, because the lesson and the closeness to God that it produces are much more important than the temporary deprivations or embarrassments involved.

We do not know with certainty whether Nebuchadnezzar came to know God well enough to be saved. But we do know that he paid attention to what God was saying, and that, for a

Babylonian, he learned a lot about God. We also know that one of the greatest leaders of ancient history showed more humility, when corrected, than many Christians do. Though in control of so much from a human perspective, the king acknowledged that God was in control of more - this alone is a great victory for our God, who is in control of the universe.

### ***No Way Out - Daniel 4:28-37***

It is interesting that the dream was not fulfilled right away. God gave Nebuchadnezzar a chance to change his heart, but although the king had learned to accept many of the truths God taught him through Daniel, deep in his heart he still clung to his pride. Despite the genuine humility he showed on occasion, and despite his appreciation and respect for Daniel, he still harbored the sin of pride, for which God had no choice but to discipline him.

Likewise, Daniel himself badly wanted for the dream not to be true about Nebuchadnezzar, towards whom he had come to feel an attachment and concern. But even this was not enough for God to relent from the punishment he had planned.

We must likewise learn that sin's worst consequences are inevitable. God does not punish arbitrarily, but to discipline us for our good. Nebuchadnezzar's other virtues did not change the necessity to crush his pride. In fact, if God had allowed him to go one without discipline, it would not have been a sign of love, but a demonstration of indifference. For Nebuchadnezzar to have any real chance of finally developing a genuine, personal relationship with God, he needed to have his pride crushed completely.

Likewise, when we are in Daniel's position, we must trust God when he disciplines those whom we care for. No amount of righteousness on Daniel's part could change the king's pride or his need for discipline. To his great credit, Daniel understood that, and regretfully but truthfully told the king what was going to happen. He trusted God and also knew that it was the king's own responsibility to change his heart. Daniel had done his part, by not holding back the truth. The rest was between the king and God.

### ***Historical Background - Nebuchadnezzar & Babylon***

As we move through Daniel, we shall continue to fill in some of the historical information that helps to understand the book. This will also help to re-emphasize some of the points that the book is making. The Babylonian Empire (or, more correctly, the Neo-Babylonian Empire) was raised up by God for a special purpose, and when that purpose was served, it disappeared. God was in control the whole time.

We have already seen a great deal of Nebuchadnezzar, the human most responsible for the success of his empire. It was his father, Nabopolassar, who led the successful rebellion of 625-612 BC against Assyria, and re-established Babylon's independence.

Nebuchadnezzar is actually known to secular history as Nebuchadrezzar (one letter different), but is usually referred to in the Bible as Nebuchadnezzar. This is not at all unusual, and in fact some secular figures have much different names that they are referred to by in the Bible. Many such differences have to do with language characteristics - even in the contemporary world there are numerous examples of proper names (persons and places) which we know in English by a

name that is much different from the equivalent name in the native language.

The first Babylonian Empire arose in the 18th century BC. That was the empire led by Hammurabi, known for his famous Code. Hammurabi was probably living near the same time as Abraham, well over 1000 years before Daniel. In the 600's BC, the Babylonians, who at the time were dominated by Assyria, began to feel that it was time to regain their lost "glory". King Nabopolassar was a successful rebel, who allied with the Medes and led the nation to victory over their main foe, Assyria. The Babylonians and Medes conquered Assyria and destroyed its capital, Nineveh, in 612 BC. (Note that this fulfilled a prophecy in the book of Nahum.) But it was his son Nebuchadnezzar, as crown prince (606 BC) and later sole king (604 BC), who brought military and political stability to Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar not only won the battles against Egypt and other new enemies that solidified Babylon's military position, he also knew how to govern effectively at home, maintaining strength and stability. The Neo-Babylonian Empire did not survive long after Nebuchadnezzar's death.

Nebuchadnezzar's discipline in Daniel 4 is not directly referred to in any Babylonian records, but the surviving records do not contradict the possibility that he was unable to govern personally for several years. In such a situation, the Babylonians would have allowed him to remain king, while appointing others to assume the daily responsibilities that he could not.

Nebuchadnezzar became ill and died in 561 BC. For 45 years he had ruled the world's leading empire, while at the same time seeking for meaning in life. We do not know with certainty what his spiritual condition was at death, but nonetheless he is one of the characters in the Old Testament most worth studying.

### ***Questions for Daniel 4 - For Discussion or Further Study***

- 1) After all the powerful and miraculous proofs of God that Nebuchadnezzar has seen, how could he still have such pride in his heart? What warnings should we take from his example?
- 2) Why did God send Nebuchadnezzar the dream before the discipline? Did God already know that the king would not heed the warning?
- 3) Nebuchadnezzar was a tough, aggressive king, and had done many other sinful things deserving of punishment. Why did God not punish him for those things, and then send him such a harsh, humiliating punishment for simply taking pride in his own achievements? What lesson should we learn from this?
- 4) How did Daniel feel about the discipline that the king was going to endure? Could Daniel have done something to prevent it, and if so why didn't he? How does Daniel's situation compare with situations that Christians face?

- *Mark Garner, Northland Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, 1999*

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## **GOD REIGNS OVER ALL: LESSONS FROM THE BOOK OF DANIEL**

### **Daniel Chapter Five: The Writing On The Wall**

*In chapter five, we move ahead beyond the time of Nebuchadnezzar to the last days of the Neo-Babylonian Empire. God sends a final message to the Babylonians, to pronounce judgment and to announce his control over their history. God raised them up to serve a purpose, and when that purpose was fulfilled, he removed them.*

#### ***Historical Background - Nebuchadnezzar's Successors***

After Nebuchadnezzar's death, Babylon was thrown into political chaos, and its days as an empire were nearing an end. Due to constant plotting and treachery, 4 new kings took the throne within 6 years, with Nabonidus in 555 BC emerging victorious as the last king of Babylon, holding the crown until its fall in 538 BC.

An interesting aside: There is an account in the Babylonian records written by Nabonidus, who says he became ill and that he was healed by "a magician, a Jew from among the captives". This was very possibly Daniel, who would certainly have acquired a reputation from his dealings with Nebuchadnezzar.

This Nabonidus was incompetent and unpopular. To avoid the violent fate of some of his predecessors (including Labash-Marduk, whom Nabonidus himself had killed), he left his kingdom, retaining the crown but leaving his son Belshazzar in charge of the nation's affairs. Thus, in Daniel 5, we see Belshazzar recognized as "king", and we see him offer "the third highest place in the kingdom" to anyone who can read the mysterious writing, because he himself was really only the second highest. This peculiar situation also explains why Belshazzar titled himself the son of Nebuchadnezzar, not of his real father, the despised Nabonidus. In a desperate attempt to claim some legitimacy in the dying days of the empire, he demanded to be associated with the only competent leader that Neo-Babylon had known. Others then referred to him in this way because it was a command, not a fact.

Note: Skeptics often have Daniel 5 on their list of "contradictions" in the Bible, because Belshazzar is referred to as the son of Nebuchadnezzar, which historically he was not. This is a good example of the types of "errors" that the skeptics find - they look at a list or genealogy of Babylonian kings, and see an inconsistency, but do not take the time to look at the whole picture. In this case, anyone at all familiar with Babylonian history would immediately understand why Belshazzar was referred to as Nebuchadnezzar's son. Many similar claims of "contradictions" in the Bible are the result of this kind of superficial research by the unbelievers.

Under Belshazzar's leadership, Babylon finished its quick death. In 538 BC, the Medes and Persians conquered it with no real opposition.

All of this not only helps us to understand some of the details of the book of Daniel, it helps us to see God's hand at work. The great and powerful, the famous and proud, the wealthy and influential - they think that the world revolves around themselves and their agendas, but these are of no importance at all in God's plans. God single-mindedly works for the knowledge and good of those who wish to know him.

### ***God Cannot Be Mocked - Daniel 5:1-6***

Often God endures the ignorance and insults of humans for many years before he acts. At other times, he quickly responds to the insolent ways that humans treat him. In Daniel 5, we see elements of both. This chapter is of tremendous interest to anyone who needs to be assured of God's control, because it is a striking example of God's reply to a human challenge, and it is also a prime example of a Bible account backed up by secular history.

We now meet Belshazzar, the young prince left in charge of the kingdom by his incompetent and unpopular father, king Nabonidus. Belshazzar's feeling about the situation was evidently that, since the "gods" had let him be king, he ought to enjoy it. So, rather than attempting to address the many problems of a decaying empire, he chose to take full personal advantage of his situation. For most of the 14 years he was in charge of Babylon, there were no immediate consequences, but one day he went too far. Having mocked his father and his subjects, having mocked every false god imaginable, he now turned to mock the living God, and this would be his last insult.

To top off an outrageous drunken revelry, when his guests are already thoroughly intoxicated, he calls for the gold goblets that had been taken years ago from the temple of the living God in Jerusalem. Nebuchadnezzar, whom he claimed as his father, had stolen them, but had kept them safely, and Nebuchadnezzar also generally treated God himself with respect, if not always obedience. But Belshazzar now uses the things of God as objects of revelry and merriment, drinking wine from them and raising toasts to false gods.

At the height of this revelry, God answers. A mysterious hand writes on the wall of the palace, writing words that the king cannot understand, but words that are undoubtedly not favorable to him. The king's fear and confusion are absolute as he struggles to deduce what this means, and to consider what he should do.

Before we go on, note some important things so that you do not misunderstand the lessons of this chapter. First, there was nothing special, in a supernatural sense, about these goblets. It is the attitude of disrespect and mindless indulgence that is Belshazzar's crime here. Second, the writing on the wall did not necessarily come as a result of this one sin alone. Nor is Belshazzar the only one being judged. Belshazzar's actions here are only the culmination of a life spent in rebellion and mockery towards the living God. And his behavior is only the most shameless example of the sins that all the Babylonians have committed without consideration or regret. God's judgment, as we shall see, had already been prepared. It was fitting to God that this judgment should be announced at the very moment when the king and his people were at the height of indulging themselves at God's expense.

### ***Pathetic Human Attempts - Daniel 5:7-17***

All of his life, king Belshazzar has never faced a situation he couldn't control. He has always had all the power, the money, and the soldiers he needed to deal with any problem that arose. But now he is faced with a novel problem - a supernatural hand that writes mysterious words he cannot understand. What will he do? Will he at last humble himself? Will he take the last opportunity he will ever have to acknowledge that there are forces greater than his power and

money?

True to the course of his entire life, the king instead tries to deal with this new problem the way he has always dealt with things - by throwing around his worldly possessions. He offers a large share of his accumulated worldly treasure to anyone who can help him out, hoping that this will not only solve the problem, but will also put him back in control. Like most humans, even most Christians, he is reluctant to stop dealing with problems and challenges in a worldly way. We all struggle with this, because we realize that if we let God take control, we humans must admit that we are not in control.

If we stop scrambling after possessions, if we stop resenting those who have more money or material goods than we do, if we accept how meaningless those things are and simply trust God to provide for our genuine material needs, if we do all these things, we're giving up control. We have to give up our control tactics - worry, envy, hurrying, manipulation, and all the others - in order to let faith and grace rule instead.

Even as a church we can be reluctant to give up our attempts to control what other believers think and do. It can be very frustrating to see other Christians struggle to obey God in basic areas of their lives, and it can be distressing when we see Christians who have many misconceptions or gaps in their knowledge of God and of the Bible. But if we try to deal with these problems impatiently, by force or intimidation, we cause bigger problems than we solve. God's power and grace are far stronger than either the problems or our own ways of dealing with them. The more that we give up our means of trying to control others, the more that God's love and strength take over.

When, as a last resort, Belshazzar sends for Daniel to ask for help, Daniel spurns his offer of worldly garbage. Daniel never was tempted by human wealth, power, or reputation, and he never thought for a moment about giving up his spiritual integrity for these things. He can and will tell the king what the writing means - but only because it is God's will that the sentence be read before the punishment, not because he wants the pathetic "reward" that Belshazzar offered.

### ***If We Forget the Past ... - Daniel 5:18-31***

Daniel now explains that the message on the wall is a simple one. God has one basic demand for all of us: that we acknowledge him and respect him. He will give us as much time as we need to understand, love, and obey him. But if we show him, by disrespect or mocking, that we have no intention of ever taking time to know him, he may call us to judgment at any time.

Daniel reminds Belshazzar that he, and all of Babylon, knew what happened to his ancestor Nebuchadnezzar. Daniel recounts what we also know from studying chapter 4, the account of the humiliating punishment that God gave Nebuchadnezzar for his pride. Again Daniel reminds us that such events are meant to be for the benefit of all who hear of them. The one display of God's grace and power made all of Babylon responsible for learning the lesson. But unlike his ancestor, Belshazzar (along with his whole generation) rejected what God was telling him, with the result that God brought the kingdom of Babylon to an end. As Daniel explained, the empire had been given its time in the sun, its days had been numbered, its actions and attitudes weighed

in the balance, and time for judgment had come. That very night the Medes and Persians, allied together, killed Belshazzar and took over his empire without a serious struggle.

Belshazzar is typical of those humans who never want to listen to God unless God gives them a special, personal sign. Many humans are so arrogant that they think they don't have to accept the same message that God gave to everyone else. Many of us think that we are so important that God is obligated to give us a unique plan for our lives, and think the lessons he taught to others mean nothing to us. Even as a church we can fall into this, when we forget that whatever problem or challenge we face has already come up countless times in the past. For every doctrinal question, moral dilemma, or societal pressure that we will ever face, God has given us numerous historical examples to show us how to deal with it. We have to avoid thinking that our problems are so special, and instead study how we can learn from others who have faced them.

As an interesting and significant aside, Herodotus and other ancient historians all dramatically support the Bible's account of this night. These historians tell us that when Cyrus the Great (king of Persia 550-529 BC) resolved to conquer Babylon, he came up with an interesting plan. Cyrus had learned that Belshazzar and all the other prominent political and military leaders of Babylon would be at a huge drunken party in celebration of their gods, so he decided to strike then, when they would not be able to organize a defense. History also tells us how he did it - Cyrus redirected the flow of a section of the Euphrates River, which flowed directly into the capital. He then marched his soldiers through the vacated river bed, so that they could approach the city unseen, and then they struck. So all the while that Belshazzar and his pals were carousing and partying, their punishment was already on the way.

Beyond the many specific lessons in Daniel 1-5, there is an important general message in the way that God used Babylon in his plans. It is no accident that the one Babylonian ruler with some real desire to know the truth "happened" to be on the throne when God allowed Babylon to capture and discipline the Jews. And it is no accident that soon after Nebuchadnezzar died, the usefulness of Babylon in God's plans was at an end, and thus God handed them over in turn for their own more permanent punishment.

### ***Questions For Daniel 5 - For Discussion or Further Study***

- 1) How does Belshazzar attempt to deal with the crisis of the writing on the wall? How is this similar to the ways that many humans deal with problems in their lives? Can Christians do the same thing?
- 2) In the past, Daniel has gladly accepted recognition, responsibility, and gifts from the Babylonians. Why now does he reject Belshazzar's gifts so harshly?
- 3) How did God use Babylon and its rulers? What does this show about God's plans? How can Christians benefit from realizing this?

- Mark Garner, *Northland Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, 1999*

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## **GOD REIGNS OVER ALL: LESSONS FROM THE BOOK OF DANIEL**

### **Daniel Chapter Six: Thrown To The Lions**

*The last narrative of Daniel takes us into a new era in history. Chapter six takes place under the rule of the Medes and Persians, conquerors of Babylon and new rulers over God's people. It re-emphasizes some familiar lessons in a new setting. Then, in chapter seven, the second and more prophetic half of Daniel begins.*

#### ***New Setting, New Ruler, Familiar Lessons - Daniel 6:1-28***

This familiar narrative, of Daniel in the den of lions, teaches many of the same lessons as do the earlier narratives, especially the confrontation over idolatry in chapter three. God teaches them now to a new audience. We shall first take a look at some of the historical background, and then study some lessons that are new in this chapter.

Chapter six takes place shortly after the conquest of Babylon in 538 BC (described from Daniel's viewpoint in chapter five). The "Darius the Mede" mentioned here was one of the temporary regional rulers who were appointed while Cyrus the Great himself (the Persian ruler of the Medo-Persian alliance) was establishing and consolidating his Empire. This Darius is not mentioned by this name outside of the Bible; he is probably the ruler known to secular history as Gobyras or Gubaru. Note that this is not history's Darius the Great, as Darius was a common name among the Persians and especially the ruling classes.

(Darius Hystaspes, "the Great", one of the important figures of ancient history, was King of Persia from 521-486 BC. It was he who attacked the Greeks at the famous battle of Marathon in 490 BC and lost, beginning the decline of Persia and the rise of the Greeks.)

The Medes and Persians, who had now taken over Babylon's Empire, had a different policy towards conquered peoples. The Persians in this era would take territory primarily as a defense against those they feared, and they usually avoided the forced resettlements that the Babylonians often used. They considered powerful countries such as Babylon to be threats, and made war against them. Towards smaller nations and peoples such as the Jews, they were much milder, since they constituted no real threat. They also realized that their subjects were more likely to be loyal and peaceful if they were treated well. Nevertheless, there were still hazards for faithful believers such as Daniel, as chapter 6 reveals.

Darius the Mede quickly notices that, among his own subordinates and of the leftover Babylonian officials, Daniel stands out in many respects. Daniel's rise in the new administration quickly attracts the jealousy of the less talented and less righteous officials, who soon begin to plot against him. They realize that Daniel's only "weak" point is his devotion to God, and after smooth-talking the king into outlawing prayer to any gods except the king himself, they are able to accuse Daniel of breaking the law and thus being disloyal. Despite the king's reluctance, they are able to have Daniel sentenced to be eaten by lions. But God shuts the ferocious lions' mouths and saves Daniel. In the king's relief at finding Daniel safe, he releases his anger and resentment towards the manipulative officials and sentences them to suffer the fate they had planned for Daniel. Here are some significant points (in addition to those made in earlier, similar, narratives) from the famous story of Daniel in the den of lions:

(i) Notice the involved plotting and deceitfulness of the envious administrators, as they attempted to find a way to undermine or harm Daniel. Envy has a strong and peculiar power over those who fall into it. Calculated malice, such as is directed against Daniel here, is a common result. Envy often results from a denial of the truth, and so, to retain the feeling of self-righteous deprivation that constitutes envy, the fiction must be maintained through further complicated machinations. When we find ourselves feeling envious, it is far simpler to accept the simple truth that, if someone else has something we desire, perhaps it is God's will that they have it instead of us. And perhaps it is not as crucial to our well-being as we thought it was.

(ii) Notice the king's anguish over "having" to send Daniel to the lions. This king is not evil by any means, and he has every desire to help Daniel. But he allows his malevolent subordinates to manipulate him into sending Daniel to apparent doom. For his weakness, the king goes through tremendous anguish, much more than is suffered by the "doomed" Daniel himself, who calmly and faithfully commits himself to God's care. Do not waste any pity on the king, who allowed himself to be tricked by appeals to his ego, and then hastily but ineffectively tried to make amends. He ends up giving in to the phony pressure that "the laws cannot be changed". The fearful always love to have an excuse like this. Even many believers today take refuge in "have to" and "cannot" when the real problem is that they do not have enough faith to resist the threats or blandishments of other human beings. Neither the threat of worldly penalties, nor the promise of worldly rewards, ever excuse the failure to do what is right in God's eyes.

(ii) Daniel is an example of lifetime faithfulness. He was now well over 80 years old at the least, and had gone through more than one lifetime's worth of trials and tests. But he is always ready for one more test - he never feels it is time to let down his spiritual guard. He is an example to all of us (whether we are of advanced physical age or have simply been Christians for many years) who have been Christians long enough to begin feeling we've "paid our dues" and thus feel entitled to take it easy spiritually. We will never have "paid our dues" as long as we live. It doesn't matter how many times you've been tested, tempted, or deprived. You still must do right the next time.

### ***Questions For Daniel 6 - For Discussion or Further Study***

1) King Darius likes Daniel, and greatly regrets sending him to the lions. Did he do the right thing, or should he have done better? What other choices did he have? How does this situation help us to understand why we sometimes cannot do what we know is right?

2) Once again, Daniel responds calmly and faithfully to a serious threat to his well-being. What lessons (new or old) do we learn from this experience?

- *Mark Garner, Northland Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, 1999*

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## **GOD REIGNS OVER ALL: LESSONS FROM THE BOOK OF DANIEL**

### **Daniel Chapter Seven: God Reigns Over History**

*We now move to the part of Daniel that is prophetic in nature. The material is much different, and can be more difficult to interpret, but the message is the same: God reigns over all. Chapter seven is one of the key prophecies in the Bible, demonstrating God's control over human history.*

#### ***A Change in Emphasis - Introduction to Daniel 7-12***

We have now reached the dividing point of the book of Daniel. The first six chapters give a historical treatment of Daniel's lifetime and events that happened in Babylon while he was there. The last six chapters go back to detail some of the many dreams and visions given to Daniel during these years.

While there are occasional dreams and visions in the first half of the book, they are for an entirely different audience and purpose. These earlier visions were for the edification of the unbelievers around Daniel, to show them God's authority. Thus they always have fairly simple interpretations that will make the message obvious. And with one exception, they are fulfilled within a short period of time, so that the authority of God will be unmistakable. The one dream with a long-term meaning, that in chapter 2, was revealed by an equally obvious display of miraculous authority.

In the last six chapters, the use of dreams and visions changes. From now on they are given only to Daniel himself, a believer with a deep respect and appreciation for God's authority. Thus these visions are not to prove God's authority, but rather to explain how he will use it in the days and years ahead, and to give Daniel insight into God's plans, for confidence and hope. These messages are not of any use to unbelievers, or to the spiritually dull. Thus we must look at them differently from the messages in chapter 1-6. Many bizarre and distracting false teachings could be avoided simply by remembering that any Biblical prophecy has an intent that can be discerned from the context. Specifically, in studying Daniel 7-12, remember two things:

(i) These prophecies are intended for the encouragement and instruction of the spiritually discerning. They are explaining how God will use his authority to accomplish spiritual goals. The primary emphasis is not on the political or historical details, and thus it is a mistake to interpret all the numbers and details literally. The spiritually mature do not take great satisfaction in being proven right about details, and they do not take great interest or pleasure in the particulars of worldly political concerns. The spiritually mature take tremendous pleasure in knowing that their God will be glorified by the humans he created, that he will work and act to glorify his name, and that he does reign over all, even though in his patience he allows humans the choice of whether to accept this.

(ii) Many of these prophecies were not to be fulfilled until long after Daniel's lifetime. (Note 12:4 and 12:9 in connection with this.) Nonetheless, in revealing them to Daniel, God was intending to strengthen and encourage him. Thus we know again that the main point of them lies not in the specific details, but in the broad spiritual lessons they teach. There is a lot in them that would be encouraging even to Daniel (who never saw them all fulfilled), and they provide even

more satisfaction for us, who have seen their full truth upheld.

### *The Parade of Human Empires - Daniel 7:1-8*

We see here a vision that is similar in meaning to Nebuchadnezzar's dream in chapter two, but God reveals much more to Daniel himself. The basic meaning of the earlier dream is also part of this one - the procession of the four great empires of Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece and Rome, followed by the power of God overcoming them all. The series of beasts in verses 2-8 parallels the parts of the statue in chapter two. Here they come out of a churning sea, which is a symbol of the restless striving of humans to take control of the universe away from God. There is much more detail here characterizing each of these human empires.

Babylon is portrayed as a lion, symbolic of its fierceness and strength, and having the wings of an eagle, symbolic of its quick, complete conquests of its neighbors. But its wings are torn off, symbolizing that its era of victory would not last long. And the lion is given the heart of a man, because, though Babylon must have looked to its victims like a special beast, all along it was based on fallible, mortal human strength. We have already detailed how Babylon rose rapidly in the 600's BC and then fell in 538 BC, after God's plans for them were finished.

Medo-Persia is a lopsided bear, "raised up on one side". The bear is lopsided because, although the Medes thought they were equals, they were only the stooges of the more powerful Persians, who used them for a short time and then took over full control of the kingdom they had conquered together. The Medes had earlier allied themselves with Babylon to overthrow Assyria, but also later found that alliance unsatisfying. Note that the bear has flesh in its mouth. Although the Persians liked to think that they were more civilized and sensitive than the Babylonians, they were by nature no more than rapacious carnivores themselves.

The Persians soon became intoxicated by their conquests in Asia, and began a long series of wars and invasions in the hopes of conquering Greece. For a time, the Persians experienced rapid progress, conquering large portions of Asia Minor and Eastern Europe, but then began to experience setbacks. At the famous battle of Marathon in 490 BC, and again at the naval battle of Salamis in 480 BC, the Greeks won and established themselves as the Persians' equals. (At Salamis, the Persians were led by Esther's husband Xerxes, referred to by the Hebrew variant Ahasuerus in some versions of the Old Testament. The historical Xerxes was an impulsive, sometimes generous, but often foolhardy ruler, just as he is described in Esther.) For a century and a half, a tense equality prevailed. Then, the Greeks under Alexander the Great were able to crush the Persians with brilliant strategy and ruthless execution, in a campaign through the heart of their empire.

Greece is portrayed as a leopard - stealthy, intelligent, conquering by brains rather than by muscles alone. Many today revere ancient Greece as an example of a society ruled by knowledge and skill, but they forget that the Greeks used these otherwise admirable qualities to conquer and oppress other, less advanced societies. The leopard also has wings, because its rise to power was swift. And it has four heads, because Greece was only united for a very short time, and then, after Alexander's death, was divided into four rival kingdoms. Most of the territory of these Hellenistic kingdoms would eventually be conquered by the Romans. The prophecies in chapters 8, 10, and 11 will tell us more about Greece, so when we get there, we shall cover more of the historical background of the Greeks.

The last, most terrible beast is Rome - not even identifiable with a familiar animal. The Romans were the epitome of human power and arrogance - yet they too could not oppose God's reign. Even within the beast there is no unity - its horns (symbolic of sources of strength) have their own stubborn wills and fight with one another. Remember the portrayal of Rome in Nebuchadnezzar's dream - the strength of iron, but disunified. As with the Greeks, we shall cover more background on the Romans when we reach later prophecies.

Note: the fighting of the horns on the fourth beast is one of the details that often creates much speculation. But every commentator who takes the horns as literal representations of specific rulers soon runs into inconsistencies and contradictions, besides the needless complexity of the theories involved. The best interpretation is simply to understand the horns fighting amongst themselves as an indication of this beast's deep disunity.

These concise characterizations reveal these seemingly powerful empires for what they really were: pathetic and futile human attempts to take control away from God. But the vision does not condemn only these four empires - it condemns all human attempts to wrest control from God, and all human beliefs that challenge God's absolute reign over his universe.

Note: Many skeptical commentators assume that these are not genuine prophecies, but were written "after the fact", to look like them. Because of this, and because of their theory as to who the author of the book was, they identify these kingdoms differently. This should not trouble a Bible believer, and the identifications given above and in chapter two are supported by the text itself and by history, as well as being agreed upon by practically every commentator who accepts the divine inspiration of Scripture

### ***The Reign of God - Daniel 7:9-28***

The parade of beasts represents the strongest human attempts to seize leadership of history from God. But even as the beasts come out of the sea, even as humans are at the peak of their restless opposition to God, judgment is waiting. The beasts themselves are neither as impressive nor as fearsome as God himself. In just a few lines, Daniel paints a striking picture of the living God who reigns over the beasts. And God does not just look powerful (as the beasts do) - he quickly shows he has real power by enacting judgment.

Before we take a look at some of the prophetic and symbolic details that we haven't covered yet, let us take note of some of the spiritual details that are even more important. One major reason why there are so many varied and bizarre uses of biblical prophecy is that so many commentators fail to observe the prophecies' context and perspective, as established in their original settings. It is a fundamental practice of sound and healthy Bible study never to interpret a Scripture to mean anything that it could not conceivably have meant to its original generation. In Daniel, we can (with historical hindsight) identify some of the nations and individuals with more certainty than Daniel could have, but we must not re-interpret the prophecies in any light that would not have made some kind of sense to him. Many of the events foreseen by Daniel took place many years after his death, but the entire series of visions was carefully connected to his own time by a continuum of events all having some kind of spiritual and/or theological significance, and were therefore relevant to him.

The remainder of chapter seven, after establishing the features of the four coming kingdoms, presents a symbolic picture of judgment, and this vision indicates most importantly that:

(i) God's victory is inevitable. God's people do experience both victories and defeats in the short term, but there is no question about God's ultimate victory. Why do we usually have so little faith or confidence in this, and why, when we do believe it, doesn't it affect our thinking or our lives in any real way? It is because we fall prey to short-sightedness and self-centeredness. We exaggerate the importance of trivial events in our own daily lives, and thus have trouble paying attention to the things God most wants us to see. That is one purpose of the Bible - to broaden our vision to the long-term, and especially to the eternal. That is what God is doing with these visions to Daniel: Daniel would never live to see the Greeks or the Romans - but he knew and appreciated what it meant that God would always be in control of them, and of any other human activities, no matter when. We must avoid using the Bible only to justify preconceived opinions. Nor is it good to look at the Bible only as a source of tactics, of "how to's", because this trivializes the Word of God by reducing it to a lifestyle manual instead of realizing that it is the key to understanding the transcending nature of God and of his plans.

(ii) All human attempts to control history or society are evil in God's sight, and all the arrogant humans who think they have "found a better way" will have their self-centered and self-righteous work destroyed in God's judgment. Neither the Babylonians nor the Persians nor the Greeks, nor even the Romans, nor for that matter the Soviet Marxist-Leninists nor the Chinese Communists, ever thought that what they were doing was actually evil, an activity completely alienating themselves from God. But God says that is exactly what was happening. And even if we don't see (or admit) how wrong we are when we try to take leadership of our lives and ministries away from God, it is still wrong. Our excuses, and the fleshly "logic" that tries to justify our lack of faith in God, are no more legitimate than the rationalizations given by Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar, or Vladimir Lenin for their own ways of rebelling against God.

### ***Some Additional Details in Daniel 7 - Daniel & Revelation***

We have now covered the most important spiritual lessons in the vision of these beasts and of the judgment upon them. Before moving on, it is worthwhile to see some of the connections between this vision and the vision John is shown in the book of Revelation. The entire book of Revelation has a single message, which is also one of the key points in these visions to Daniel: God's Ultimate & Complete Victory. Thus some of the details here in Daniel 7 reoccur in Revelation. In fact, a good knowledge of the prophetic books, in particular Daniel, Ezekiel, and Zechariah, will enable you correctly to interpret most of the visions in Revelation, and will enable you to avoid getting confused by the ways that the misguided often misuse Revelation as if it were a manual of God's political predictions and opinions.

We shall primarily look at one useful example: the parallels with Revelation 13. (We will not cover every detail here; see the recommended commentaries in the Bibliography for more.) In Revelation 13, John is shown the visions of the "Beast From The Sea" and the "Beast From The Earth", symbols that every Bible commentator in the world who can pick up a pen or use a keyboard has taken turns using to represent whatever it is that best fits in with his or her pet theories about Revelation.

We see in Revelation 13:1 the dragon - explicitly identified in Revelation as Satan - standing on the shore of the sea. The symbol of the sea in prophecy generally represents the striving and fighting of human nations as they attempt to gain pre-eminence. How appropriate that Satan is close by, watching. In 13:1-4 we see only one beast, not four as in Daniel 7, but look more

closely. This beast is just a composite of the others. Note the specific parts of the beast: it combines features of a leopard, a bear, a lion, and the almost indescribable features (e.g. the strange horns) of the fourth (Roman) beast from Daniel 7. To God, human empires are all part of a whole - the attempt of sinful humanity to control its own destiny, the humanistic desire to reign in God's place. That is what the "Beast From the Sea" is. It's not a particular evil country (nor is it a particular false religion or a particular evil individual). It's every country, every nation, every race, every group of people anywhere who think that who they are, or what they've done, or what has happened to them, gives them the right to take the course of history and society into their own hands, rather than resting their fate on God's grace.

Note that both in Revelation and in Daniel the beasts can appear terrifying and intimidating. ("Who can make war against the beast?") But they are soon not just defeated, but humiliated, and exposed as having no true power. To both Daniel and John, there is no doubt about God being in control all the time, and that God will, in his own time, put the beast of human self-will in its place.

For further study on Revelation, two highly recommended commentaries are:

G.K. Beale, *The Book Of Revelation* (New International Greek Text Commentary)  
Michael Wilcock, *The Message of Revelation* (Bible Speaks Today series)

Also worthwhile is Jim McGuiggan, *The Book of Revelation*. Others that take somewhat different approaches include commentaries by Coffman, Hendricksen, Hinds, and Mounce.

### ***Questions For Daniel 7 - For Discussion or Further Study***

1) Describe the following general features of the prophecies in Daniel 7-12: (i) their intended purpose, (ii) their intended audience, (iii) the time frame of the predictions. How should these features influence our reading of them?

2) Review the four kingdoms referred to in 7:1-8 and in 2:31-43. Do these kingdoms of the distant past have any relevance for today's Christians? Liberal commentators often state that these were not genuine prophecies, but were made up after-the-fact. Why is it important to know that this theory is erroneous?

3) Why would it have encouraged Daniel to know of things that God would do hundreds of years in the future? How important would an event after someone's lifetime have to be to provide encouragement? What things do we look to in the distant future that encourage us?

- *Mark Garner, Northland Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, 1999*

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## **GOD REIGNS OVER ALL: LESSONS FROM THE BOOK OF DANIEL**

### **Daniel Chapter Eight: The Ram & The Goat**

*Two of the kingdoms in Daniel's key prophecies in chapters two and seven are Medo-Persia and Greece. The vision in this chapter provides more prophetic detail about these empires and their conflicts.*

#### ***The Ram & The Goat - The Vision & its Meaning - Daniel 8:1-27***

This chapter is a more detailed look at the Medo-Persian and Greek Empires. They are symbolized now by a two-horned ram (Medo-Persia) and a goat (Greece). The conflict between the two, and then the activities of the goat's horns, are shown to Daniel for two reasons. First, this is an accurate portrayal of the next long period of history that would begin after Daniel's lifetime. As such, it connects the events of Daniel's own lifetime with the next era of history, to help Daniel see how the various stages of God's plan fit together. Then, as in all else that God has taught to and through Daniel, it is a confirmation of the victorious reign of God. Daniel saw this vision while Belshazzar was still king of Babylon, about 10 years before Babylon would fall to Medo-Persia. Yet God could speak as if the future had already become reality.

The two-horned ram (Medo-Persia) at first seems invincible, but soon the goat comes to challenge it. There is no real reason for the goat and ram to hate each other, as there is never reason for human conflict or any other sin, but each wants to be the one and only ruler of the world. It is the goat (Greece) who emerges victorious from the battle, and he shows no mercy over the fallen ram. In actual history, it took many years for the Greeks first to hold off Persia, then to begin to gain supremacy, then finally to win a crushing victory. Yet to God, the time it took was nothing, and the Persian period of supremacy was short on his time scale. And the Greeks showed just as much mercy to the fallen Persians as the goat does to the ram here.

The Persian-Greek Wars were one of the defining events in the history of the ancient world, and affected many nations besides those two alone. Here, we shall take only a brief look at the highlights. The references listed in the Bibliography will have much more detail. What is especially interesting from our perspective is that this important aspect of world history was not only foreseen by God, but was also a key part of his plans for his people.

As we have seen before, the Persians and their allies the Medes defeated the Babylonians in 538 BC. Flushed with victory, they continued to expand afterwards. After dealing with some of their less powerful neighbors, they came into contact with the Greeks.

The Greeks by this time were already an ancient people and culture. They had settled large areas of the Mediterranean world, including some far from Greece. But they were not a unified nation. The leading Greek cities engaged in perpetual rivalries with one another, and it was this expenditure of energy and resources against fellow Greeks that kept them from being more of a threat to other nations, and also made them vulnerable to attack.

In the last part of the 6th century BC, the Persians were dramatically successful in conquering the Greek-settled areas in what is now western Turkey (Asia Minor), and then swept through

Macedonia and northern Greece. By 490 BC, the Persian armies were nearing the great Greek city of Athens, and attacked the Athenian army on the plain of Marathon. There the Athenian army was outnumbered, but superior generalship won them a dramatic and crushing tactical victory, sending the Persians limping homeward. This was the first setback for the Persians, and it began to turn the tide. The Persians returned, and again penetrated into the Greek heartland in 480 BC under King Xerxes. At Thermopylae Pass, they nearly finished the job, when they cornered a large Greek army, but a group of 300 Spartans under King Leonidas I fought a valiant delaying action, sacrificing themselves to allow the other Greeks to escape. Later in the same year, the Persians were repulsed at the naval battle of Salamis, when the Athenian commander Themistocles formed a clever plan that capitalized on Xerxes' well-known impatience. After that, the balance began to turn in favor of Greece.

By the middle of the 5th century BC (that is, the 400's) Greek power was on the rise, but internal rivalries and hatreds prevented them from taking effective action against the Persians. Most of all, the lengthy and wasteful (and foolish) Peloponnesian War (431-404 BC) drained the strength of the two most powerful city-states, Athens and Sparta. In the early 4th century BC, internal struggles continued, with first Sparta and then Thebes taking turns at dominating and oppressing their fellow Greeks. Finally, Philip II of Macedon overcame these senseless rivalries and established Macedonia as the undisputed leader of Greece by 338 BC. Philip's son, Alexander the Great, then became ruler in 336 BC, and he would be the one to conquer and crush the Persian Empire, and to establish the Greeks as a dominant power.

The Greeks did not long enjoy uninterrupted mastery of the world. Alexander, whose drive and ability had preserved Greek unity and led to Greek conquests, lived a life of indulgence and selfishness that led to his early death in 323 B.C. After his death, the newly established Greek Empire was divided into four pieces, and each was led by a ruler far inferior to Alexander. This is the meaning of the features of the goat in Daniel 8 - the "prominent horn" (v. 5) is Alexander, and it was broken of and replaced by four little horns (v.8), these new smaller pieces of the Empire, called in history the Hellenic kingdoms. This symbolism is explicitly explained to Daniel in v. 21-22.

Historical note: There were originally five successor kingdoms after Alexander's death, but the generals in control of them, called in history the Diadochi, soon fell out with each other and fought. The kingdom in the middle, ruled by Antigonos, was divided up amongst the remaining four. See the comments on Daniel 11, and Map B.

We shall take a detailed look at two of these new Hellenic kingdoms, the Ptolemaic and Seleucid, in chapter eleven. These are the two parts of Alexander's former empire that for years would fight for control over Israel. The particular "horn" referred to in 8:9-14 (and the explanation in 8:23-25) is a Seleucid king, Antiochus IV, called "Antiochus Epiphanes", a mad king who provoked war with God's people by his outrageous acts against God, including the desecration of the rebuilt temple in Jerusalem. He tormented the Jews for several years, but was then himself destroyed.

This desecration would last "2300 evenings and mornings", or 6 1/2 years, which is very close to the time period (170 B.C.-164 B.C.) of Antiochus's rule. Antiochus' reign was a troublesome time, but also a defining moment in the history of the Jews, because in response to his outrages, they launched a successful rebellion under Judas Maccabeus and his family, and became independent for the first time in several centuries.

This time-span of 6 1/2 years, besides being very close to the literal length of Antiochus' actual reign, has a more important symbolic significance, in that it falls just short of 7 years. Seven is a symbol of God's perfection, and thus the "6 1/2 years" shows the futility of Antiochus or any human attempting to achieve perfect control - all such attempts will fall short. The whole vision is one more reminder that God reigns over all, and any human who forgets this opposes not other humans, but God himself.

Daniel of course would not have understood all of the details of this message. For example, he would not of course have known Alexander or Antiochus by name. But Daniel could have grasped the basic meaning and significance of these prophecies. As an educated person, Daniel would have been familiar with the Greeks and their history, as well as the other nations and peoples involved in the visions that God sent to him.

In interpreting his prophecies, we are thus on the safest ground when we look for explanations that would have made some sense to the spiritual, educated believer of Daniel's day. It is interesting to note Daniel's own response to the vision (v. 27). He had been told that it concerned the distant future (v. 26) and found it burdensome to see a vision that contained much beyond his ability to interpret. The same prophet who confidently went before kings and revealed the meaning of dreams and miraculous signs is not even willing to claim to himself the ability to unravel all the details of a private vision. This should give us humility in interpreting his visions - we should avoid getting carried away with unjustified speculations, or with our own cleverness. It is best to interpret those details which the vision and history make clear, and then simply concentrate on the spiritual message being given, rather than indulging in idle speculation about things that we cannot understand.

### ***Questions For Daniel 8 - For Discussion or Further Study***

- 1) Why do the ram and the goat fight each other? What is God's perspective on this conflict? What perspective should Christians have on wars between worldly powers?
- 2) If God foreknew the coming of wars and other unpleasant events, especially those that would happen to his own people, why didn't he stop them? What lessons are there for today's believers in this?
- 3) How much of this prophecy would Daniel have understood? Why did he feel exhausted by it (v. 27)? What lesson is there for us in the way Daniel received these visions?

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## **GOD REIGNS OVER ALL: LESSONS FROM THE BOOK OF DANIEL**

### **Daniel Chapter Nine: God's Plans For His People**

*As we move through the last six chapters of Daniel, God continues to show Daniel what will happen in future generations, as it pertains to the plans God has for his people. In chapters nine and ten, we also learn a great deal about Daniel and the relationship he had with God.*

#### ***Daniel's Relationship With God - Daniel 9:1-19***

Daniel was not the kind of religious leader who thought he didn't have anything to learn from previous generations. In these verses, he learns from an old prophecy made by Jeremiah. (See Jeremiah 29 for details, and note also 2 Chronicle 36:20-21.) Jeremiah foretold that Babylon would have a 70-year period of supremacy, and then God's people would be allowed to return to their own land. There is much to learn from the lessons that Daniel himself gets here, but even more to learn from seeing the kind of relationship with God that Daniel has.

As Daniel studies the prophecy, he realizes two things: first, that according to the prophecy, the time for the return was very near, and second, he sees how badly God's people must have hurt their God by their sin, for God to have to send them away from the land he himself had given them. Daniel sees these important insights because he was not just an occasional student of the Word. He constantly studied and meditated on it, and diligently sought to understand it.

It is important for Christians to know about such events as the period of exile that God decreed for his people. The exile came in spite of their zealous outward worship of him, and has important lessons for the contemporary church. Jeremiah's 70-year prophecy is also important, not as a Bible Trivia question, but for its spiritual significance. Unfortunately, many of today's believers are unfamiliar with the past and with the lessons it teaches.

Daniel is thus an important example for today's Christians, not only in the things he learned and taught, but in very the way that he studied God's Word. He was diligent, devoted, and disciplined. Therefore the things that Daniel learned from the Bible were not superficial, nor did he just use the Bible to "prove" what he already wanted to be true.

Notice next that when Daniel realizes these things, he is moved to pray. This is also a good practical example to follow. As soon as he has assimilated the lessons God's Word was telling him, he immediately talks to God himself. He does not at once go and talk about them to other humans, but wants first to make sure that he understands and that he allows God to direct him in how to respond to what he has learned. He speaks to God in a genuine manner - no clichés, no dishonesty, no rationalizations. He talks about what he has learned, and acknowledges the need for God's grace and strength.

Recall that Daniel himself was a teenager when the period of Babylon's oppression began, and Daniel was himself taken captive to Babylon to serve Nebuchadnezzar. He is not afraid to look into his own heart and soul as he once more thinks about the period of discipline that God sent upon his people. He realizes that the best way to get closer to God is to relate personally to the things God's Word teaches.

This is yet another important aspect of Daniel's relationship with God that we can emulate ourselves. Though we may not have been "there" when any of the events in the Bible took place, we can still take the time to pray, think, and meditate on what it would have been like, so that we, like Daniel, can make our relationship with God as personal as possible.

### ***A Perfect Period of Waiting - Daniel 9:20-27***

Daniel has been meditating on the lessons of Jeremiah's 70-year prophecy, and now he is sent a vision of even more important plans God has for the world, which are to take place long after Daniel's day. This "Seventy Sevens" prophecy is another one that is often misinterpreted and misused. Certainly it is easy to manipulate numbers to prove a point if you already know what the point is you want to make, and many commentators have done just that. But there is a simple, powerful message here from God. God's own simple but powerful message may not be as exciting to some as the commentators' clever scenarios are, but it has the advantage of being true. We'll first examine the basic meaning from context, and then will examine the best of the alternate explanations you may find in works on Daniel.

The vision is best and most accurately interpreted in the context of what Daniel has just been studying - the 70-year waiting period before God's people could return from exile. The hope of return was probably the thought uppermost in the minds of most Jews during these years. The excitement of returning to their homeland cannot be overstated - and now the time was here! But now Daniel learns that there would be another period of anticipation - not just a "70" but "70 7's" to wait until something even more important and more exciting. That is, the coming of Jesus Christ, to express the complete fulfillment of God's reign. You could paraphrase what God is saying to Daniel as follows: "You've learned about the `70' that my people wait before they are released from captivity to foreigners. And you are humbling yourself before me, because you know that your sin and wickedness brought about that `70'. Now, if you wait 70 "sevens", there will be a final release from the burden of your sin and wickedness."

Note how this answers Daniel's troubled prayer about the sin of his people. God's reply is not a non sequitur, unconnected to what Daniel is saying, but rather he is assuring Daniel that the day will come when the kind of discipline his own generation underwent will be unnecessary. Daniel is assured that there is a final answer to the problem of sin. We know that answer as Jesus Christ.

The 70 "sevens" are not a literal 490 years, but a way of expressing in symbols the completeness of God's plan - 7 being a symbol of divine perfection and 10 a symbol of human completion. Thus this plan, to send the One who was both Son of God and Son of Man, was a complete plan (and a perfect plan) in every way. Look at what is to happen at the end of the waiting period: an end to sin, an atoning for wickedness, everlasting righteousness, an anointing of the most holy (see verse 24). All these came with Jesus Christ, and all were far more important than the most exciting developments in the history of Israel. Jesus would not come after exactly 490 years, but the period of approximately 500 years accurately stated the general time frame, and carries this more important symbolic significance.

The prophecy divides the waiting period into intervals of 7, 62, and 1 "sevens". The next section below summarizes the basic alternative theories, so that you can compare them for yourself. But it is also necessary to point out that many commentators have tried to manipulate these numbers, and the definition of "seven", simply to arrive at the dates that prove their pet points. Religious

persons perform this type of Bible gymnastics, and believe in fictions such as pre-millennialism, primarily because it is not exciting enough to them to have their sins forgiven, to have been declared righteous, or to have the promise of a home in heaven. It is more exciting to be able to come up with (or hear from someone) some theory that no one ever thought of before, especially if that theory is futuristic and contains lots of vivid, exciting events. Such scenarios are especially attractive if they involve Christians getting to rule the world and to turn the tables on unbelievers. But even besides the obvious spiritual deficiencies of such a perspective, those commentators who try rigidly to fit these literal times into a coherent whole inevitably run into great difficulties, and must convolute their explanations with a great deal of tortured logic. This is because the whole approach of trying to force all the details of the vision into literal time periods is based on a faulty assumption.

The numbers are merely symbolic of the need to wait until God, in his own time, is ready to complete his plan. There needed to be a time of waiting for Daniel and the other faithful of the Old Testament, a time of preparation for Jesus the Son of Man and Son of God. While the general time frame of Jesus is close to the approximation of 500 years, it would have been inconsistent with God's approach to Messianic prophecy to specify an exact literal date. God wanted his people to know the general time frame when Jesus would come, through this and the prophecy in chapter seven. But he also wanted them to have to recognize Jesus for who he was, not know in advance who he was because God had given them the exact date.

A final detail comes towards the end of the chapter (v. 26-27), when it is explained that after the last "seven", the system of sacrifice will end, which will be associated with "an abomination that causes desolation". Jesus himself referred to this in Matthew 24:15. This is best understood as referring to the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans, not long after Jesus' death (but also not exactly seven years later), which had the effect of permanently ending the Levitical ministry. This ministry was no longer needed after Jesus' once-for-all sacrifice, as Hebrews explains in detail.

Historical note: In AD 66, a large-scale revolt of the Jews in Judea led the Romans to decide once and for all to get rid of the Jews and their constant uprisings. General Vespasian led a large army that lay siege to Jerusalem. Vespasian became emperor in AD 69, and the siege was continued by his son Titus. In AD 70, the Romans finally took Jerusalem and destroyed it. In particular, they destroyed the temple, and with that came a permanent end to the ancient Levitical ministry. The Jews who were not killed were scattered, and it was not until the 20th century that the Jews again had a homeland.

### Alternate Explanations of the Seventy `Sevens'

Many of the scenarios that commentators conjure up concerning Daniel chapter 9 are too ridiculous to waste time refuting. But there are two alternate scenarios that have enough substance to describe. There is a pre-millennial chronological interpretation, and a non-millennial chronological interpretation. If you do further study on the book of Daniel, you are likely to run into one or the other.

Both start with a convenient choice of the beginning date of the seventy sevens, which Daniel is told will be "the issuing of the decree to restore and rebuild Jerusalem". The pre-millennialists make their scenario work by choosing 445 BC, the year Nehemiah was authorized to begin rebuilding Jerusalem's walls. In itself, this could be an acceptable option. This places the end of the first 69 sevens (483 years) at AD 39. They then place the crucifixion (approximately AD 31 or 32) at the beginning of the 69th week. Then they say that the 69th week is an indefinite

period that has not stopped, a large gap. The 70th week will then come when "the Antichrist" appears, and will feature "the Rapture" and other standard pre-millennial concepts.

This view is clever, but is inconsistent. To insist that the first 68 "sevens" be literal seven-year periods requires that the last two be so as well. Further, it does not give Jesus' death, burial and resurrection the climactic place it deserves. These should come at the end of "seven" number 69, not at the beginning. The pre-millennialists consider that their mythical thousand-year kingdom, in which they fantasize about defeating "the Antichrist" and ruling the world, is much more exciting than getting their sins forgiven. Therefore, they place these imaginary events at the crowning position of fulfillment.

The non-millennial chronological view is better, and is closer to the truth. Those non-millennialists who want to interpret the "seventy sevens" as a literal 490 years begin their dating with 458 BC, when Ezra was allowed to return to Jerusalem. Then, the first 69 "sevens" come end in AD 26, which is a year or two before Jesus began his public ministry. The crucifixion would then come in the middle of the 70th "seven", which they see as a fulfillment of the statement in verse 27 that then end of the sacrificial system will come in the middle of the last "seven". This view is at least internally consistent, and is not entirely wrong.

The major weakness with it is that the Ezra mission in 458 BC cannot in any literal way be described as a decree to restore or rebuild Jerusalem, since it was primarily a mission of teaching and spiritual growth. Most versions of this explanation also have difficulty resolving the rest of the details, such as the "abomination that causes desolation", in a consistent way.

There are a few other details in this chapter that we have not dealt with completely, but they can be pieced together once the basic perspective is clear. For more, see the sources referenced in the bibliography.

### ***Questions For Daniel 9 - For Discussion or Further Study***

- 1) Name some of the things that characterize Daniel's approach to studying the Scriptures. Why are these qualities important? In what specific ways can Christians emulate Daniel in this respect?
- 2) Summarize the prophecy from Jeremiah that Daniel was studying. What attitude would the Jews of Daniel's time have had about this prophecy? Do you think they would have understood its full implications? What was Daniel's understanding of it? What significance does Jeremiah's prophecy have for us?
- 3) How does the prophecy of the 70 "sevens" relate to what Daniel was studying and praying about? How should this guide us in interpreting it? Outline the basic meaning of the 70 "sevens". What value would this have had to Daniel? What should we get out of it?

- *Mark Garner, Northland Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, 1999*

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## **GOD REIGNS OVER ALL: LESSONS FROM THE BOOK OF DANIEL**

### **Daniel Chapter Ten: In Awe Of Godly Things**

*In chapter ten, we get another glimpse into Daniel's own relationship with God. It is remarkable about Daniel that he remained so humble in the face of all the amazing visions that God gave him, and in the midst of the miraculous events in his life.*

#### ***Daniel's Response to Spiritual Reality - Daniel 10:1-10:21***

Daniel has gotten used to seeing images that taught him about the future, but now in chapter ten he sees an actual angel, who brings him detailed news about the future. The whole situation is overwhelming to Daniel, and he feels absolutely terrified and helpless. The men with him cannot see the angel, but they see Daniel - and just seeing Daniel's fear is so terrifying to them that they run and hide! Daniel has even been preparing himself for some time for a vision, as he is expecting an explanation of an earlier message. But just the glimpse of a heavenly being overpowers him.

We in the church would do well to have even a fraction of this real awe and spiritual fear before our God. People in the church carelessly, and often presumptuously, toss around words like "awesome" to describe God, without having a real appreciation for what "awe" really is. We may even become convinced that it is really ourselves, and our activities, that are so "awesome", and often humans are merely babbling when they speak of God's greatness and of how "awesome" he is. Daniel's awe before God was far more genuine than ours. Daniel didn't swagger around, confident that he was running a successful ministry. Daniel didn't rely on phony "motivational" slogans or tactics, because he had an appreciation of genuine spiritual reality.

Daniel also appreciates the meaning of what the angel tells him. It frightens him not only to see an angel, but to realize the completely different view of history he is hearing. The angel talks about everything in different terms, from a different perspective, and with different ends in mind. The angels, and God himself, are little concerned with the concerns and goals that occupy most of our energies. Unfortunately, we are also too often just as little concerned with those things that they think are important. Throughout the book of Daniel, we have seen that shortsighted humans may get what they want for a while, but in the long run God will humble them.

There are some interesting details to note in this chapter, which give us a small glimpse into spiritual reality. It is a reasonable and probably correct assumption that the "man dressed in linen" (v. 5-6), whose body was like chrysolite and face was like lightning, and also "Michael, one of the chief princes" (v. 13 and v. 21), who helped the man in linen, are angels or at least similar celestial beings. Likewise, it seems likely that "the prince of the Persian kingdom" (v. 13), who resisted the man in linen, is a malevolent angel or celestial being.

But beyond these basic assumptions, it is wise not to draw too many more definitive conclusions. All manner of speculations are suggested by the tantalizing details of spiritual reality in this

chapter, and some of these speculations may even be correct. But it is far better to avoid them, and instead merely to appreciate this small glimpse of the grandeur of spiritual reality that is real and active, even though we cannot see it now. We should view this scene as a hint of the glory we shall see when we ourselves are able to leave the present physical world. Only the rudiments of the true nature of spiritual reality can be grasped by us in our present mortal form. Rather than becoming impatient, and indulging in unnecessary and probably erroneous theorizing and conjecture, we ought instead simply to draw re-assurance that there are beings much more powerful than us who are there on our behalf when truly needed. For now, there are more important lessons of immediate importance that we need to learn and apply.

In the next chapter, we shall see the specific prophecies in chapter 11 that the angel reveals to Daniel. But the specific details of prophecy should take a back seat to the awe we can develop for God's wisdom and his power. Daniel always kept this in perspective, and we should maintain this perspective as well.

### ***Questions For Chapter 10 - For Discussion or Further Study***

- 1) Indicate some of the suggestive details we glimpse in this chapter about the reality of celestial beings. What should our response be to these details? How can we view them to the best spiritual benefit?
- 2) Describe Daniel's response to being visited by the "man in linen". What were some of the effects on Daniel? How should we learn from his response to spiritual reality? How would or should we actually respond if we saw God or an angel?
- 3) What message does the "man in linen" bring to Daniel? What else does he say to Daniel? How is Daniel expected to respond? What message is there in this to us?

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## **GOD REIGNS OVER ALL: LESSONS FROM THE BOOK OF DANIEL**

### **Daniel Chapter Eleven: A Tumultuous Future**

*In the last two chapters, God continues to elaborate on his Messianic plan to Daniel. In chapter eleven, God reveals the ways that the coming era of Greek rule will challenge and test his people, and then speaks of the transition to the next era. Next, in chapter twelve, God will present a final picture of some essential features of his kingdom.*

#### ***A Raging Battle - Daniel 11:1-11:35***

Daniel 11 contains a detailed view of the lengthy struggle for control of Israel and its inhabitants that took place in the three hundred years before Jesus's birth. This is an interesting period of history that is not covered in the Bible itself. Our sources for knowledge of this period are other ancient historians, some of which are listed in the bibliography.

The prophecy in Daniel 11 is the one that was brought by the angel with whom Daniel speaks in the previous chapter. Notice that the angel begins (verses 11:1-4) with some things now familiar to our study. The Persians reigned over much of the world at the time Daniel had this vision (which was about 536 BC, according to 10:1, and which also was the year that the first small group of Jews was allowed to return to their homeland), and would enjoy many more years of superiority. But, as we saw in chapter 8, they would very soon (in God's time) be toppled by the Greeks. The "mighty king", Alexander, will conquer them, only to have his own empire broken into four pieces. After that, chapter 11 goes into detailed predictions of the lengthy battle between the Egyptian Ptolemies and the Syrian Seleucids, who fought for control of Israel for many years.

The first few verses in chapter 11 remind us of the Persians' eventual downfall, and the rise of the Greeks under Alexander the Great. After Alexander's death (323 BC), his empire was divided into four parts, administered by his generals. Alexander's young son and half-brother were rulers in name, but everyone knew that was a fiction that would never become reality. Alexander's successors are often referred to as the Diadochi, and the kingdoms that arose as Alexander's empire split up are collectively called the Hellenistic Kingdoms. There were originally to be five main divisions: Macedonia & Greece proper under Cassander; Thrace under Lysimachus; the Peloponnesus, present-day Turkey, and Palestine under Antigonus; Egypt under Ptolemy Soter, and the eastern territories, including Babylon and Persia, under Seleucus. But war broke out quickly amongst the Diadochi, and it was not long before Antigonus's kingdom, located in the center of all the others, was defeated and divided up amongst the other four, each of which then was strong enough to survive.

After the consolidation down to four kingdoms, two of them, the kingdom of the Ptolemies of Egypt and the kingdom of the Seleucids of Syria, bordered on each other near Israel. For many years these two fought each other and oppressed God's people. Israel originally had belonged to Antigonus's kingdom, then was taken by Seleucus when Antigonus was defeated and his kingdom dismembered. It was at the edge of Seleucus's holdings, however, and Seleucus could

not hold it for very long before Ptolemy annexed it in 301 BC. The Ptolemies held it for over 100 years before the Seleucids were finally able to take it back.

The period of Greek rule was a new challenge for God's people in that the Greeks, even the ones such as the Ptolemies and Seleucids who no longer lived in Greece, were extremely proud of their culture, and contemptuous of everyone else's. They exerted many pressures on the Jews to conform to Greek cultural patterns, which caused many conflicts - between Jews and Greeks, and also amongst the Jews themselves. Many Jews found it expedient to accommodate the outward aspects of Greek culture, in order to achieve favor and advancement. In time, these Jews would develop into the party known as the Sadducees. Others went to the opposite extreme, rejecting even minor ways of adopting Greek culture. In time these Jews developed into the Pharisees.

We shall now survey this period, as described by Daniel. Chapter eleven is a good summary of the important features of the era, insofar as they affected God's people. Those are the aspects of most importance to us, but we shall also make note of a few historical facts that help to complete the picture. For most of chapter eleven, the "king of the north" refers to the Seleucids, and the "king of the south" refers to the Ptolemies. So that you can better see how Daniel 11 matches what actually happened in history, in the survey that follows the historical names have been filled in where Daniel's vision had only a generic reference. Besides the events described here, there are many other interesting events in the period, having less relevance to Daniel's prophetic outline (see the additional sources given in the Bibliography).

Ptolemy I established a strong kingdom, containing Israel, and his early successors maintained it despite frequent plots and wars with the Seleucids (in Daniel 11, this is verses 5-8). Meanwhile, in the Seleucid kingdom, Seleucus II, aided by his sons and his grandson Antiochus III, launched a vigorous attack on Egypt, but it failed, which gave Egypt a false sense of security (v. 9-12). The warlike Antiochus III (who in human terms was a powerful and effective ruler, known to history as Antiochus "The Great") attacked again with an even larger army, and many Jewish leaders supported him. These Jews foolishly thought that he would be easier to serve than the Ptolemies (v. 13-14). Antiochus then achieved a series of victories beginning in 198 BC, but was finally checked when the Romans, alarmed at his expansion, fought and defeated him at Thermopylae (192 BC) and Magnesium (191 BC). Despite these final setbacks, through the series of battles he acquired large territories for the Seleucids, including the area called Palestine or Israel (v. 15-18). After his death, Seleucus IV came to power briefly, but was murdered by his own prime minister, the notorious tax collector Heliodorus (v. 19-20).

Through threats and flattery, the evil, half-mad king Antiochus IV "Epiphanes" stole the throne from Seleucus's son Demetrius Soter (v. 21). In 170 BC, Antiochus IV launched a new attack against Egypt and king Ptolemy VI, having prepared for it by convincing some of Ptolemy's allies and military leaders to turn traitor, by lies and appeals to their greed. After his victory, he harshly persecuted his subjects, especially the Jews (v. 22-28). But his next attack on Egypt was not successful, because this time the Romans backed Egypt, and humiliated Antiochus by ordering him to back down. The frustrated oppressor then vented much of his rage on the Jews (v. 29-30). Antiochus used some unfaithful Jews to assist him in desecrating the temple, burning a "sacrifice" of a pig on the altar, and sprinkling pig's blood throughout the temple area (v. 31). Though many Jews failed in their faithfulness at this time, many were faithful, and Judas

Maccabeus and others arose to lead God's people, who eventually revolted successfully against Antiochus (verses 32-35). The Maccabean revolt in 167 BC was followed by a lengthy period of intermittent warfare that eventually led to the Jews achieving independence in 142 BC. (This independence was, however, an uneasy time, and it ended in 63 BC when the Romans invaded and conquered the region.)

Note that even besides the powerful evidence of fulfilled prophecy, there is much to be learned from the history of God's people and the surrounding nations. Over and over we see human leaders rise and fall, with nothing to show for their fighting and striving, while always we see God reigning, patient and supreme over all. When God's people hold fast to their spiritual purpose, God's wisdom is demonstrated. But when they give in to worldly desires, they pay the price for their lack of faith.

### ***Another Transition - Daniel 11:36-11:45***

Daniel concludes by looking towards the day when God would, through Jesus, tie together all his plans for his people. The truly godly, like Daniel, can appreciate God's plans even when they must see them from afar. As we have seen, God has revealed to Daniel how the steps of his plan, and the eras of coming history, fit together as a whole. Thus Daniel could look all the way to the days of Christ's kingdom, over 500 years ahead, and see it as the logical development and spiritual fruit of his own times.

In 11:36-45, we see the coming rise of the Romans. In Daniel's visions, they are always the most ruthless and the most voracious of nations. Unlike the other powers Daniel prophesied about, who already had achieved some world prominence, Rome in Daniel's day was still a local power only, struggling to survive harsh competition from other cities in the Italian peninsula. But they were on a long, slow rise to power that would culminate in their great victories in the late third century BC and in the second century BC, which would propel them to dominance of the Mediterranean world. It is thus likely that Daniel did not know that Rome was the "4th kingdom" in his prophecies, and it may have frightened him to think of the future rise of an unknown but fearsome empire. But "what has been determined must take place" (v.36), and the Romans were a necessary part of God's plan. These verses foretell the Roman conquests and attitudes. But then, in chapter 12, we shall also see the fulfillment of God's own plans.

Daniel 11:36-45 has been the subject of numerous interpretations. All 'conservative' commentators agree that 11:1-35 refers to the events described above, through the time of Antiochus IV "Epiphanes". And all but a handful agree that in verse 36 there is a transition to a new king or a new era, despite the use of images and language (e.g. v. 40) used earlier of the Greek kingdoms. The main division among interpreters is between those who see this as a transition to the Romans, versus those who see it as a transition to the "end times", meaning a millennial kingdom and/or the Last Judgment. This latter group base their interpretation primarily on the images in chapter 12, which verse one says will occur "at that time", referring back to the end of chapter 11. They can only see these images as relating to the "end times". The former group of commentators, who see this transition as being to the Roman era, base this conclusion on the context and on the general plan of the visions in chapters 7-12.

The identification with the coming of Rome is the better interpretation of the passage, since it shows more faithfulness to the purpose and pattern of the book. The main argument against it is the assumption that the images in chapter 12 could only refer to the Last Judgment, but this is not, as examined below, the only possible interpretation, or even the best interpretation, of chapter 12.

***Questions For Daniel 11 - For Discussion or Further Study***

- 1) What challenges would have created for God's people to be caught in the middle of the clash of worldly powers? Is there anything in this period that resembles situations that Christians face today? What lessons can we learn from the Jews' experiences under the Ptolemies and Seleucids?
  
- 2) What purpose would it have served to reveal these detailed future events to Daniel? Would Daniel himself have been able to draw any encouragement or edification from them?

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## **GOD REIGNS OVER ALL: LESSONS FROM THE BOOK OF DANIEL**

### **Daniel Chapter Twelve: The End**

*Daniel concludes his series of visions with some vivid images of the nature of God's kingdom. Though these are often associated with the last judgment, there is an even more immediate sense in which these are meant to be understood.*

#### ***A Time of Judgment - Daniel 12:1-4***

The images in chapter 12 bear an obvious resemblance to our expectations of the Last Judgment, and many readers, especially when not reading them in context, assume that they could only be referring to that period. But chapter 12's main purpose is to present some final images that describe the nature of the spiritual kingdom that God will reveal and establish through Christ, as the last several prophecies have been leading up to. Chapter 12 is not isolated from the other visions, but is the completion of them. There are three main themes in these final visions: judgment, perseverance, and cleansing.

Verses 12:1-12:4 do not refer only (if at all) to the Judgment Day or the final resurrection. While it is not entirely wrong to associate them with that event, the overall context suggests that this passage is figurative, and is first of all looking to the day when, in Christ, the remnant of God's people, those who had remained true to God, would become a resurrected, spiritual, indestructible nation. At the same time, those of God's people whose hearts had left him would be revealed as the sons of hell they were. The elderly Simeon prophesied this about the then-infant Jesus in Luke 2:34-35, when he said Jesus was "destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, ... so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed". The image here in Daniel is similar to Ezekiel's "Valley of Dry Bones" (Ezekiel 37:1-14), which also refers not to the resurrection on Judgment Day, but to a Jewish spiritual resurrection. A similar use of the imagery of the dead rising from the grave is Isaiah 26:12-21 (compare verse 14 with verse 19; these refer to the respective destinies of the pagan nations and of Israel).

Likewise, the "time of distress that has not happened from the beginning of nations until then" (v. 1) does not necessarily refer, if it does so at all, to something that will happen shortly before the Last Day. Since it is connected by the beginning of verse 1 to the last verse of chapter 11, it is best to look to there for the context, and hence for the interpretation. Viewed in this context, it can be seen that all of Daniel's predictions were fulfilled in the coming of Jesus and the subsequent destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70, which dispersed the Jewish people and ended the Jewish sacrificial ministry.

There are basically three possible interpretations for the events referred to in Daniel 12:1-4 -

(i) Those few commentators who see 11:36-45 as being set in the time of the Seleucid kings also place 12:1-4 in that context (a logically correct implication of their first conclusion). They see the time of distress as the turmoil under Antiochus IV. The main problem with this (if we assume that the troubles the Jews experienced then were of a magnitude deserving of verse 1's

description, which is perhaps a stretch) is that there is no good way to connect the rest of 12:1-4 with that era. And it would be inconsistent to dislocate the image of judgment from the rigorous historical interpretation used in the rest of this approach. It therefore seems reasonable to discard this theory.

(ii) Daniel 12:1-4 could be construed as applying exclusively to the end of the world and the Last Judgment. Most of us assume that then the pictures of judgment we see in these verses would be an accurate description of that Day, but we do not know with certainty either, because the image we have of the Last Judgment rests entirely on assumptions that certain Scriptures refer to it. With Daniel 12:1-4, the major problem with this is that it does violence to the context. If this is what the verses mean, then it is uncharacteristic of Daniel to present them in a way that appears to have a more direct connection with the clearly historical events in chapter 11. Wallace's commentary takes this position that the verses refer to the Last Judgment, and his handling of the passage is probably the best of those commentators who have this perspective, because he rightly cautions his readers not to make too much of the details, because we know less than we assume we do about what really will happen at the Last Day.

(iii) Daniel 12:1-4 can be seen to have fulfillment in the coming of the church, in the way that it brought judgment on the nation of Israel in causing them to accept or reject Jesus, and in the final end to the Jewish nation in AD 70, which brought unspeakable deprivation and suffering on the Jews. This connects contextually with 11:36-45, assuming that passage refers to the Romans, and is consistent with Daniel's constant emphasis on the series of four empires, with God's kingdom to be established in the time of the fourth one (Rome). The only real difficulty with this approach is not with its explanation of verses 1-4, but with the need to interpret verses 5-13 consistently with it. This is dealt with below. McGuiggan's commentary takes this approach, and his is perhaps the most complete presentation of this way of reading these verses.

If we emphasize the context of Daniel and try to keep our understanding of his prophecies in keeping with the running themes he has established, then the best understanding of verses 1-4 is that they refer primarily to the coming of the kingdom of God through Jesus Christ, and events associated with that era (as in iii above). It does also seem safe to assume that many of the images in these verses will be seen to be applicable to the Last Judgment as well, but it is best to be cautious with any further applications to the "end times" from these verses. (There is always the possibility of an intentional dual prophecy, such as is common in Isaiah and some other prophets, but such a prophecy would be the exception, not the rule, in Daniel.) Yet whatever you conclude about the specific reference in these verses, it is important to note that God's judgment is not only a significant concept in connection with the end of the world. God and his Word judge our hearts and minds even now, and although many humans look at the Bible (or at Jesus, or at Christianity in general) with an eye towards deciding what they think of it, in reality they are the ones being evaluated and judged by an impartial God.

### ***Symbols of Perseverance & Cleansing - Daniel 12:5-13***

The book concludes in 12:5-13 with more well-known symbols, of perseverance and cleansing. Even so, our understanding of them, and particularly of the images and symbols in verses 7 and 11-12, will be influenced by our conclusions on verses 1-4, as described above. Accordingly,

they can be interpreted as literal time periods taking place in the sequence of events (the "time of distress") leading up the end of the world, or can be seen as having a symbolic significance as to the nature of the present kingdom of God, the church. "The time of the end" (verse 9) can be understood either as the end of the world, or as the culmination of all that God has revealed to Daniel earlier, in announcing the (then) future coming of his kingdom through Christ.

In Matthew 24, Jesus himself referred to Daniel's "abomination that causes desolation" (v. 11), a reference there to the Roman troops that would occupy Jerusalem and the temple in the Romans' final siege of Jerusalem, which is the subject of most of Matthew 24 (the context is Matt. 24:1-2). This fits well with the approach of 12:1-4 as referring primarily to the New Testament era. Alternatively, commentators who view Daniel 12 as referring to the end times apply the "abomination that causes desolation" to some aspect of their scenario. As with other details of end times scenarios, they cannot be directly proven or disproved (which is why it is so popular to speculate about the end times), but can only be evaluated in terms of how well they fit the Scriptural context. In this case, it again fits the context of Daniel and Matthew much better to accept the abomination in a historical setting, now fulfilled.

The "time, times, and half a time", or "1290 days", likewise do not have to be literal time periods, but are better understood as symbolic of human power. Both, as well as the 42 months of Revelation 13:5, are about half of seven years - so they are saying that human power is imperfect, never complete or lasting. God's saints only have to out-wait their human oppressors (1335 days is just a bit longer than 1290) to be able fully to share in God's victory.

As before, these symbols can be incorporated as literal time periods in to those theories that see Daniel 12 as an end times scenario. And as before, it is not possible to prove or disprove them directly, only to ask whether that method is in keeping with the context of Daniel.

Whether Daniel 12 has significance to the end times or not, the values taught in 12:5-13 are equally important to study and to appreciate. The major principles being expressed are perseverance and cleansing. Whether we are talking about the experiences of God's people in the past, present, or distant future, perseverance is important if we wish to overcome the pressures and stresses of living in a world dominated by unbelievers. And whether the end is near or is far off, the most urgent need of any human is to be purified and cleansed of sin, to be sanctified for a holy purpose, to be made right with God.

Throughout Daniel we are challenged to answer: Who is reigning? Who is in control? Who is in charge? And when we realize that it is God alone who reigns, we are called to examine our attitude. We can try to retain some power ourselves, to make things happen without waiting on the hand of God, we can replace God's promises of grace and eternal life with fleshly programs or complicated theories of the future. Or, we can humbly accept in our hearts that we have no real conception at all of God's biggest plans, and can thus rejoice in not having any control, in not having any authority, so that we can fully share in and appreciate the victory that God will ultimately win.

### ***Questions For Daniel 12 - For Discussion or Further Study***

1) Regardless of whether Daniel 12 refers to the end of the world or not, what general principles does it teach to believers? In what situations or settings are these principles important?

2) Look back through the book of Daniel and notice the many things that have been shown to be under God's reign - that is, all the things over which Daniel has shown that God has control and authority. For each of these things:

(i) In what ways do humans today rely upon these things, or look to these things for safety, power, or purpose?

(ii) Is it possible for Christians to put more confidence in these things than in God?

(iii) What parallels in our own experience might there be to the situations or setting in Daniel that illustrate God's reign?

3) Summarize the major points made in the prophetic section of Daniel (chapters 7-12). Of what importance are these prophecies to Christians, now that they have been fulfilled?

- *Mark Garner, Northland Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, 1999*

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