

## Church and Theology

### Where the Bible and the Local Church Meet

Studies in the Book of Daniel<sup>1</sup>

#3—Submitting to God's Sovereignty

Daniel 2:1-35

Paul S. Karleen

As we begin our study of the second chapter of Daniel, I'd like you to think about Job and something that he said in Job 13:15: "Though he slay me, yet will I hope in him." In midst of great long-term suffering Job shows that he understands that God controls his circumstances and he submits to that sovereignty.

In 1 Pet. 5:5-6 we read, "God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble."<sup>6</sup> Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time.<sup>7</sup> Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you." These words were written to Christians who were undergoing severe trials (a trial can be defined as a difficulty in our lives sent by God). Peter tells us in ch. 1 that trials come from the hand of a sovereign God. We are to bring what we do into line with the source and purpose of such difficulties. There are alternatives that we seek out, of course. One path might be to not take a stand for the truth. Another might be to rely on our own wits and abilities to get around the trial. The very fact that the Bible provides teaching on trials such as in 1 Pet. 1 and 5 or Heb. 12 means that trials can be a failure point in the Christian life.

In Daniel 2 we have one of the two most prophetically comprehensive chapters in the Bible (the other is ch. 7). It presents God's plan for humanity from 605 BC to the Second Coming and the Millennial Kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ. The key text is v. 12: "He changes times and seasons; he deposes kings and raises up others." The whole earth entered the times of the Gentiles in 605, and Israel is for a time "lo-ammi," not my people, in the words of Hosea 1:9. Yet God cannot be thwarted: he will bring in blessing for his people Israel through his sovereign plan. The striking statue that Nebuchadnezzar sees teaches that God's plan sets up and then destroys four successive kingdoms, with the Kingdom of God victorious over the fourth. It is a certainty that God's program will unfold kingdom by kingdom—"he deposes kings and raises up others"—and result in blessing for Israel in a kingdom on earth that other Scripture tells us will be ruled over by Israel's Messiah. This statue presents world history from the standpoint of God's plan to bless Israel.

We will treat this chapter in three studies: 1) the setting for the revelation of the dream and its interpretation; 2) explanation of current ideas of the Kingdom on earth as background for understanding the meaning of the statue; and 3) the meaning of the statue in the dream.

In this study we will see how Daniel's character and actions form an illustration of the message of the statue. Just as God controls Israel's situation during Daniel's time and will control it into the future, so he controls the pieces of Daniel's life in his response to the statue dream. And Daniel responded by putting himself under the control of the God who controls history. He humbled himself under God's mighty hand. Daniel's example provides an encouragement for us to put the affairs of our lives under the control of the one who is sovereign over history.

#### **1. The setting: a stress on God's sovereignty over Israel**

There are six parts to the chapter:

- a. The experience of Nebuchadnezzar with the dream

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- b. The failure of the court soothsayers to interpret the dream
- c. Daniel's preparation to interpret
- d. The statement of the content of the dream
- e. The interpretation of the dream
- f. The results of the interpretation

The key verse is v. 21—God is sovereign over everyone and everything. We should be thinking about Eph. 1:11 (“the one who works all things according to the counsel of his will”) and the question I have asked many times in my teaching in the last few years: Was everything that happened in your life yesterday part of God’s express purpose and will? Of course, the answer is yes, but are we content with God’s having this kind of control over us? Or do we look for a way out—as Jonah did? We will see that Daniel understood this (I’m sure he would have answered “Yes” to my question) and was happy that God controlled his circumstances.

## 2. Nebuchadnezzar’s dream experience—v. 1

In the second year of his reign, Nebuchadnezzar had dreams; his mind was troubled and he could not sleep.

According to v. 1 Nebuchadnezzar was so disturbed by his dreams that he could not sleep. One of the most powerful people in the world was terrified. He had risen to power quickly and was only in his second year as king, so he must have viewed the dream as a threat to his authority. God has a way of showing us that we are not as big as we think we are.

## 3. The failure of the advisors—vv. 2-13

Here we see the emphasis that there is no wisdom apart from God.

<sup>2</sup> So the king summoned the magicians, enchanters, sorcerers and astrologers to tell him what he had dreamed. When they came in and stood before the king, <sup>3</sup> he said to them, “I have had a dream that troubles me and I want to know what it means.”

<sup>4</sup> Then the astrologers answered the king, “May the king live forever! Tell your servants the dream, and we will interpret it.”

<sup>5</sup> The king replied to the astrologers, “This is what I have firmly decided: If you do not tell me what my dream was and interpret it, I will have you cut into pieces and your houses turned into piles of rubble. <sup>6</sup> But if you tell me the dream and explain it, you will receive from me gifts and rewards and great honor. So tell me the dream and interpret it for me.”

<sup>7</sup> Once more they replied, “Let the king tell his servants the dream, and we will interpret it.”

<sup>8</sup> Then the king answered, “I am certain that you are trying to gain time, because you realize that this is what I have firmly decided: <sup>9</sup> If you do not tell me the dream, there is only one penalty for you. You have conspired to tell me misleading and wicked things, hoping the situation will change. So then, tell me the dream, and I will know that you can interpret it for me.”

<sup>10</sup> The astrologers answered the king, “There is no one on earth who can do what the king asks! No king, however great and mighty, has ever asked such a thing of any magician or enchanter or astrologer.

<sup>11</sup> What the king asks is too difficult. No one can reveal it to the king except the gods, and they do not live among humans.”

<sup>12</sup> This made the king so angry and furious that he ordered the execution of all the wise men of Babylon.

<sup>13</sup> So the decree was issued to put the wise men to death, and men were sent to look for Daniel and his friends to put them to death.

The wise men had no clue as to the content of the dream and its meaning. Some have suggested that the four types of wise men represented key categories of counselors, showing that Babylon's best in the wisdom realm could not compete with the God of Heaven.

Nebuchadnezzar had probably not forgotten the dream, otherwise, if his wise men suspected he had, they would have gone ahead and made something up. Also, Nebuchadnezzar knew he had a basis for discerning the truth or falsity of any content they might give him.

The result of their failure to describe the dream and then interpret it was that all the wise men came under a death sentence that included Daniel and his friends. Today we know the outcome, of course, as found in the next verses. But if we were to read the account at this point simply as literature, as a story, we should be struck with the seriousness of Daniel's situation. Suppose you were relating this account as a bedtime story to a young child who had never heard it before and you stopped here and said, "We'll see what happens tomorrow night." The response would probably be something like, "Don't stop now; I have to find out what happens to Daniel!" And that's the line of thinking we should follow. This is now a life-or-death situation, more explicitly frightful than the test in chapter one. We cannot appreciate Daniel's actions unless we understand the danger he was in. God sovereignly put him in a trial that seemed to be ready to take his life.

#### **4. Daniel's preparation to reveal and interpret—vv. 14-30**

<sup>14</sup> When Arioch, the commander of the king's guard, had gone out to put to death the wise men of Babylon, Daniel spoke to him with wisdom and tact. <sup>15</sup> He asked the king's officer, "Why did the king issue such a harsh decree?" Arioch then explained the matter to Daniel. <sup>16</sup> At this, Daniel went in to the king and asked for time, so that he might interpret the dream for him.

<sup>17</sup> Then Daniel returned to his house and explained the matter to his friends Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah. <sup>18</sup> He urged them to plead for mercy from the God of heaven concerning this mystery, so that he and his friends might not be executed with the rest of the wise men of Babylon. <sup>19</sup> During the night the mystery was revealed to Daniel in a vision. Then Daniel praised the God of heaven <sup>20</sup> and said:

"Praise be to the name of God for ever and ever;  
wisdom and power are his.

<sup>21</sup> He changes times and seasons;  
he deposes kings and raises up others.

He gives wisdom to the wise  
and knowledge to the discerning.

<sup>22</sup> He reveals deep and hidden things;  
he knows what lies in darkness,  
and light dwells with him.

<sup>23</sup> I thank and praise you, God of my ancestors:  
You have given me wisdom and power,  
you have made known to me what we asked of you,  
you have made known to us the dream of the king."

<sup>24</sup> Then Daniel went to Arioch, whom the king had appointed to execute the wise men of Babylon, and said to him, "Do not execute the wise men of Babylon. Take me to the king, and I will interpret his dream for him."

<sup>25</sup> Arioch took Daniel to the king at once and said, “I have found a man among the exiles from Judah who can tell the king what his dream means.”

<sup>26</sup> The king asked Daniel (also called Belteshazzar), “Are you able to tell me what I saw in my dream and interpret it?”

<sup>27</sup> Daniel replied, “No wise man, enchanter, magician or diviner can explain to the king the mystery he has asked about, <sup>28</sup> but there is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries. He has shown King Nebuchadnezzar what will happen in days to come. Your dream and the visions that passed through your mind as you were lying in bed are these:

<sup>29</sup> “As Your Majesty was lying there, your mind turned to things to come, and the revealer of mysteries showed you what is going to happen. <sup>30</sup> As for me, this mystery has been revealed to me, not because I have greater wisdom than anyone else alive, but so that Your Majesty may know the interpretation and that you may understand what went through your mind.

Here the stress is on Daniel’s total dependence on God. Don’t underestimate the seriousness of the situation. If Daniel couldn’t get the answer, he would die—along with his friends and all the Babylonian wise men, whom Daniel undoubtedly knew. This was a critical moment in his life. What would he do?

Three things happen here: 1) prayer, 2) answer, 3) praise. Daniel’s first act is to pray with his companions. This was one of the keys to his strength. His ability to order the affairs of his life and understand spiritual matters was due to his dependence through prayer. The result here was that in response to prayer God gave Daniel the content of the dream in a vision—a miraculous revelation. Daniel’s immediate reaction is to give thanks to God. He knew that his new knowledge came from God, not from his own work. God was the source of his wisdom.

In the face of a threat to his life, brought about by the sovereign hand of God, Daniel humbled himself before God. Unlike Jonah, who, when faced with a difficulty brought by God, Daniel turned to God in complete dependence during the trial.

The NIV translation here in v. 28 “in days to come” is literally “in the latter days.” Some translations have “in the future.” I do not know why the NIV has what it does, but the phrase “latter days” is frequently used in the OT to refer to the time from the coming of Christ through his Kingdom, for example, in Jer. 23:20; Ezek. 38:16 (concerning Gog and Magog); Hos. 3:5 and Micah 4:1. The last reference here, predicting a time of blessing for God’s people Israel, says, “It shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the house of the Lord shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and it shall be lifted up above the hills; and peoples shall flow to it.” We will comment on this in our treatment of the meaning of the parts of the statue in a coming study. The phrase is also used later in this chapter.

## **5. The description of the dream—vv. 31-35**

<sup>31</sup> “Your Majesty looked, and there before you stood a large statue—an enormous, dazzling statue, awesome in appearance. <sup>32</sup> The head of the statue was made of pure gold, its chest and arms of silver, its belly and thighs of bronze, <sup>33</sup> its legs of iron, its feet partly of iron and partly of baked clay. <sup>34</sup> While you were watching, a rock was cut out, but not by human hands. It struck the statue on its feet of iron and clay and smashed them. <sup>35</sup> Then the iron, the clay, the bronze, the silver and the gold were all broken to pieces and became like chaff on a threshing floor in the summer. The wind swept them away without leaving a trace. But the rock that struck the statue became a huge mountain and filled the whole earth.

We should notice these general features of the statue and its demise:

- a. There is one statue, meaning that God views all of history as a unit consisting of four powers. We need to stress that this is *God's* view of human history from 605 BC to the Kingdom.
- b. The statue is enormous and terrifying. This explains Nebuchadnezzar's fear in v. 1. The splendor of human kingdoms is frightening even to a king.
- c. There is a progressive decrease in fineness from top to bottom—from gold to a mixture of soil and metal.
- d. The whole statue is pulverized instantly.
- e. Only something external to the statue can crush it.
- f. The statue disappears entirely.
- g. Only the rock and mountain remain.

We will see in a future study when we interpret the parts of the statue that the external force is Jesus Christ himself, destroying all hostile powers to set up his Kingdom. Thus, the statue shows that as powerful and awesome as human kingdoms may be, they are always under God's control. He sets them up and, in his time, takes them down.

This chapter teaches the same lesson in two parallel features—the statue and Daniel's experience. Ultimately all the inhabitants of the earth will come under the visible control of the rock, the Lord Jesus Christ. Daniel eagerly put himself under God's control in the trial he was in, and was happy to thank God for his sovereignty.

Daniel's responses in this chapter show that he understood the sovereignty of God and he placed himself under it. We can follow Daniel's example by doing these things:

- a. Understand that God controls everything and reflect it in my life by enjoying that control
- b. Realize that I am not as great as I think I am
- c. Live in dependence on God
- d. Rely on the power of Christ to take me through life

Are we eager to say that we are happy that the one who controls history controls me? Have we established the pattern of humbling ourselves under God's might hand during trials?

### **Questions for further study:**

1. What are some of God's purposes in trials?
2. Can we figure out when this chapter occurred?
3. Did Nebuchadnezzar remember his dream? What information do we have to help us answer this question?
4. Can you see some ways in which our text pits Babylonian gods against the true God?
5. See if you can find some other references to "latter days." You could try consulting a Bible dictionary or concordance.