

DANIEL

Today I hope to get us immersed a little in the Book of Daniel. Some people do not read Daniel much, except for the stories about The Lion's Den and The Burning Fiery Furnace. Those are great stories, and a person could do worse. But I hope you go out of here today feeling like the Book of Daniel is one you are familiar with and understand. Some books start out seeming pretty straightforward but end up being really complicated. Daniel sounds a little complex at first, but it is actually very simple and straightforward – once you know the code. And the code is the history of the time.

The Book of Daniel acts like it is being written about Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon (605-562 BC). But that is only the storyteller's art. It is actually being written about four hundred years later (168-165 BC), just after the desecration of the temple in Jerusalem by Antiochus IV Epiphanes. The writer is using the Nebuchadnezzar situation as a reminder and wake-up call for the crisis the Jews are facing in 168 BC. Of course, you do not have to agree with this. But if you will come with me into the story's flow, you will discover it is told with more power and passion than most people realize.

There is a lot of historic detail to get straight, but it is not really hard to grasp. Babylon had conquered the known world and, in the process, had carried Judaism and most of the Jews of Israel into slavery – hauled them off to Babylon, in what was known as the Babylonian Captivity. Subsequently, the Medes conquered the Babylonians, and Darius was their great king. The Persians conquered the Medes, and Cyrus was their most famous leader. Then the Greeks (Macedonians) conquered the Persians, and everyone else in sight, under a young general known as Alexander the Great. The tiny land of Palestine had been walked over, as usual, by all of these armies in turn. Palestine was not really a country, it was a corridor – between Egypt and anywhere. The Jews had not been conquered so frequently because people cared about conquering them; it was just that they lived in the corridor. They were never the real object of the campaigns of the major empires; they were just in the way. Do any of you identify?

Alexander died at the age of thirty-three (like a few other famous people we have heard about). His kingdom was divided among his generals. While there were ten generals, four of them quickly emerged as the major

rulers of Alexander's Empire. After one hundred years of Ptolemaic rule (the Egyptian quarter), Palestine fell under the control of the Seleucid Empire (headquartered in Antioch). The Seleucid king at the time was Antiochus IV Epiphanes. The Jews of his time regarded him in approximately the same light as the Jews of our time have regarded Hitler, and for approximately the same reason. Antiochus decided to destroy Judaism – to obliterate the Jews, at least those who insisted on staying Jewish.

When you get home today and start reading the Book of Daniel, you will find that, apart from The Lion's Den and The Burning Fiery Furnace, the book is full of weird visions. Only, now that I have reminded you of the history of the time, they will not seem weird at all.

You will come across the king's dream, in which he sees a great image. (Daniel 2) The head is of gold, which stands for the Babylonian Empire. It has breasts and arms of silver, which represent the Medes (great and wealthy, but not as great and wealthy as Babylon). Its belly and thighs are of brass; that is Cyrus and the Persians. Its legs are of iron, referring to Alexander the Great. Iron was the miracle metal of the time, and very precious because it was stronger than any metal previously known. If you carry iron and your opponent still uses bronze, guess what? You are going to cut right through his sword and shield. Anyway, in the king's dream, the legs-of-iron imagery means that Alexander was invincible. After Alexander's death (323 BC), the kingdom was divided up. This is represented by the feet, which are iron mixed with clay. Alexander's generals were strong, but they were competing with each other and did not have Alexander's scope or genius.

Then a stone not made with human hands breaks the statue and fills the earth like a great mountain. That is God standing behind human history, and he will break the kingdoms of mortals and establish an everlasting Kingdom of righteousness and peace. At least that is the great HOPE – the Messianic Prophecy. God is biding his time but God will come – and people must wait and remain faithful, even in the face of severe injustice, trials, and persecution. That is the overriding message of the Book of Daniel.

Now that you have the pattern, the rest is easy. Later, Daniel has a dream of four beasts. (Daniel 7) The lion with the eagle's wings is Babylon. The bear represents the Medes. The leopard is the Persians. The fourth beast – terrible beyond description with iron teeth – is Alexander and his undefeatable armies sweeping across the world.

But the fourth beast has ten horns – Alexander’s ten generals – and one terrible little horn: Antiochus IV Epiphanes.

Once again comes the HOPE. “*There came one like a son of man. [It has a familiar ring to it, yes? Jesus’ favorite title for Himself.] To him was given dominion and glory and kingship His dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away*” (Daniel 7:13-14) At the time, of course, they were not thinking of this kingdom in spiritual terms.

Next comes the story of the ram and the he-goat. (Daniel 8) The ram is Babylon, its shorter horn being the Medes, and its longer horn being the Persians. The he-goat represents the Greeks (Macedonians), with its one great horn being Alexander the Great. The great horn is broken while the he-goat is still strong, referring to Alexander’s early death. Four other horns grow to take its place, meaning the four generals who divided up Alexander’s Empire: Cassander (Macedonia), Lysimachus (Asia Minor), Seleucus I (Syria and Mesopotamia), and Ptolemy I (Egypt). Then out of one of the four horns (the Seleucid Empire) there grows a little horn: Antiochus IV Epiphanes. The little horn will rise up against God and the horn will be broken – not by human hands, but by God.

This is the backdrop and the theme of the Book of Daniel: Do not despair. God is still in charge. Things will still work out the way they are supposed to, in the end.

But I said there was passion and drama here. What was actually happening in Palestine at the time was this: The Greeks, like all those in power, believed that their civilization was far superior to anything the world had ever known. Some would still agree with them. Part of their philosophy of government was the belief that their mission was to Hellenize the world. Alexander’s dream was to unify and enlighten and bring peace to the whole earth by bringing everyone under the wisdom of the Greek Way. How many of you watch the Olympic Games when they come around? Hellenization is still at work.

But there are always a few hard-heads who want to spoil the dream – folk who will not cooperate – people who insist on hanging on to their own ways and beliefs and who think their own God is best. An inordinate number of these hard-heads, down through history, have been Jewish. Jews have had significant dealings with God, and they cannot be easily talked out of their covenant with Yahweh.

Antiochus was a hot-head. The more the Jews resisted his efforts to Hellenize them, the angrier he got. He finally realized, correctly, that unless he broke the Jewish religion, he would never be able to control the people. It is always *religion* that keeps people from total political or social control. Why do you think communism is atheistic? Why do you suppose Christianity takes such issue with humanist perspectives and movements in our time?

In any case, Antiochus determined to exterminate Judaism. It became punishable by death to circumcise a son. It was death to the parents, to the son, and to the priest who performed the ceremony. It was death to be caught reading or even in possession of Jewish Scriptures. (Today, if his soldiers came, you would each be slaughtered unceremoniously because there is a Bible in the pew rack in front of you.) It was death to sacrifice to the Jewish God, or to meet to worship in Jewish ritual or ceremony. It became a requirement, under penalty of death, to sacrifice and bow down to the Greek gods. This was the real-life threat behind the stories of The Lion's Den and The Burning Fiery Furnace. (By the way, Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon never had any such attitude toward the Jews; it was Antiochus, four hundred years later, who instituted this pogrom.)

In 168 BC, Antiochus took his troops into the Jewish temple, tramped into the Holy of Holies, stole everything of value, and sacrificed a pig on the holy altar. You know, I presume, that pigs have had a poor reputation in Judaism. Eating them was forbidden. Sacrificing a pig on Yahweh's altar was unthinkable. In Judaism, this event was known as "the abomination of desolation." It was beyond words or tears – as indeed Antiochus knew it would be.

The Jews didn't have a chance. Their religion was doomed (and therefore, so was ours – no Judaism, no Jesus). At the time, the Jews had no army, no money to raise one, no organization for resistance, no way to get help from anyone anywhere. Once again, it seemed like God was dead, or that God had deserted or just did not care. It seemed as if their whole history, from Abraham on, had just been a sad, fantastic dream without merit or reality. From all appearances, it was over.

But about that time, there appeared a little book entitled DANIEL. It started out with a story about a burning fiery furnace, and another about a prophet who was thrown to the lions because he would not stop praying to his God. A simple little book, it seemed, but it said: "Don't give up. The story isn't over yet." The people read it, told it, retold it, and

decided that if they could not live in faithfulness, they would die in faithfulness – because apart from their God, nothing really mattered anyway.

Here is the historical account: *“And the king sent letters by the hand of messengers unto Jerusalem and the cities of Judah, that they should follow laws strange to the land, and should forbid whole burnt-offerings and sacrifices and drink-offerings in the sanctuary; should profane the Sabbaths and feasts, and pollute the sanctuary and the holy persons; that they should build altars and temples and shrines for idols, and should sacrifice swine’s flesh and unclean beasts; and that they should leave their sons uncircumcised, that they should make their souls abominable with all manner of uncleanness and profanation; so that they might forget the law and change all the ordinances [of God]. And whosoever shall not do according to the word of the king, he shall die.”* (I Maccabees 1:44-50)

The Jewish answer came in the third chapter of Daniel – disguised, but only to the Gentiles. The story of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego is told as if it occurs under Nebuchadnezzar. But it is Nebuchadnezzar alias Antiochus: *“Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego answered the king, ‘O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter. If it be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of your hand, O King. But if not ... [“But if not” is the difference between superstition and faith – the difference between pretense and obedience] ... But if not, be it known to you, O King, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image which you have set up.’”*

One day, an emissary from Antiochus arrived with his soldiers in the little village of Modein. They came to enforce the edict and force the villagers to bow down and sacrifice to the Greek gods. Everyone was quaking with fear and shame. The officers noted one old man, a priest, who seemed to have authority in the village. They called on him to lead the village in compliance with the king’s decrees. They offered him silver and gold if he would set a good example, and they told him that he and his whole family would be enrolled in the ledgers as special “friends” of the king. But the old priest stepped forward and spoke as follows:

“Even if every nation living in the king’s dominion obeys him, each forsaking its ancestral religion to conform to his decrees, I, my sons and my brothers will still follow the covenant of our ancestors. Heaven preserve

us from forsaking the Law and its observances. As for the king's orders, we will not follow them. We will not swerve from our own religion either to right or to left." (I Maccabees 2:19-23)

Despite the brave speech, one villager lost courage and came forward to the altar of the pagans. But the old priest sprang forward and struck him down with one blow. The king's commissioner died from the priest's second blow. Then the villagers ran for the hills. The soldiers were caught by surprise, too dumbfounded to stop them.

That old man's name was Mattathias and he had five sons (John, Simon, Judas, Eleazar, and Jonathan). They came to be known as "the Maccabees" – God's hammers. It was a real-life Robin Hood story, and long before King Richard the Lionheart. The faithful and the persecuted fled to the wilderness to join the Maccabees. They became the most incredible guerrilla fighters the world has ever known. Antiochus sent troops against them, then armies, and then larger and larger armies.

The Maccabees fought for thirty years. One by one, the brothers were killed, each one stepping into leadership in his turn. If their courage has been equaled, which doubtless it has, yet it has never been surpassed. Ill-equipped, penniless, hungry – held together by faith alone – they fought. They fought in the hills and they fought in the valleys. They fought the Greek phalanx that had conquered the world. They fought against horsemen and they fought against armed elephants from India. They fought with the odds 30, then 50, then 100 to 1 against them. They fought 'til their valleys were knee-deep in blood.

"Be it known to you, O King, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image which you have set up."

When the Maccabees finally won Jerusalem, their first act was to build a new altar and purify and rededicate the temple. That event is celebrated to this day with the Feast of Lights – Hanukkah. It is *not* Jewish Christmas – it is the biblical Fourth of July!

Sometimes people ask me, "Why do you study this stuff?" I do because it is my story – my heritage. I do not believe we can know what is going on today if we do not know what went on yesterday. How can we serve God, or be faithful, if we do not understand the issues?

The United States is not a Christian nation. That is not meant as an insult. It is not even a negative remark. It is a fact. The United States is a nation of, by, and for the *people* – not of, by, and for God. The atheist, the agnostic, the Buddhist, the home Baptist can be just as American as any Christian. Citizenship in this country is not a matter of religious persuasion. Our forebears made it this way on purpose. And clearly, the policies of our country and the people who hold power are not necessarily committed to Christian concepts or beliefs.

Many of us believe that our political structure is the best the world has seen. We want religious liberty and we want it for all people. We believe that even our God approves of this. But there is a dichotomy.

The state works to preserve itself. It believes in freedom, democracy, and the pursuit of happiness. The church works for a spiritual kingdom not of this world. Rather than freedom, it believes in discipline and commitment. Rather than democracy, it believes in absolute obedience to a Holy God. Rather than the pursuit of happiness, it seeks a peace that comes in sacrifice, stewardship, dying to self, costly service.

Life in our country is based on a kind of treaty between church and state. The people of the church agree to live as law-abiding citizens within the state. The state agrees not to interfere with our religious obligations and observances.

But today, that treaty is being broken on both sides. Treaties too constantly broken result in a return to warfare. Let us hope not. The perilous situation comes from our careless way of dumping church and state together (in our minds) into a hodgepodge of American sentimentalism. The church expects the state to act with Christian motives. The state expects the church to act with nationalistic motives.

The real fault lies with the Christians. Because we were once such an undisputed majority, we think the state is our friend as Christians, not just as citizens. We have allowed ourselves to be enticed away from our faith by the motives and the goals – the golden images – of the state. When things do not go the way we want, we try to blame the state. But the state never promised to be Christian for us, or toward us. It only promised to allow us to be Christian ourselves, if we wanted to be. If our faith is to survive in this country, it will be because of the church, not because of the state. If Jesus Christ is to be our Lord, it will be because of our faith and devotion, not because of any law or influence from our society.

We have wanted all things to be in our favor. We have wanted to be nice, popular, approved of by our society. We have wanted all the benefits of a secular society, and few of the disciplines of the Christian WAY of Life.

But the pagan king's decree has gone out over the land. And the decree is this:

That recreation and pleasure shall be more important than the community of Christ's people. (An exact parallel to Hellenism: you shall attend sports and games, and not your worship services.)

That we must live to get and keep ourselves rich.

That we must compromise our morals and our honor for security and success.

That we will no longer keep sacred the vows of marriage.

That we will no longer seek our vocations under God.

That we will no longer teach our children the heritage and traditions of our faith if it conflicts with the social life and opportunities of the society around them.

That we will no longer keep the traditions ourselves, if they become too inconvenient.

That we shall give a mere pittance of the time, money, energy, and devotion that the Christian WAY of Life requires.

There is an answer. Not everyone desires or intends to give it, but there is an answer: *"Be it known to you, O King, that we will not serve your gods, or worship the golden image which you have set up."*