

Daniel: The Power of Faithfulness - Good Men in Bad Times - Lesson 1.

I. Overview of the Book.

The book of Daniel is noteworthy for its bifid structure. "Bifid" means organized into two obviously distinct parts. The first six chapters of the book of Daniel talk about Daniel's experiences, how he and his friends and associates were taken into captivity, and were transported to Babylon, settled there, and impressed into the civil service of Babylon.

The second half of the book, on the other hand, is talking about Daniel's visions. It is in that category of literature that we call apocalyptic. With chapter 7, there comes the descriptions of Daniel's visions, how he saw hidden truth revealed, how within that category that we call apocalyptic, there were symbols of things and images and the sweep of history described. What was hidden from the average person, that is, God's future plan, was shown to this prophet Daniel so that he might pass them on in comfort to the people of God in reassurance. The book really has two different sections to it; they both involve Daniel, but one is a story about him in chapters 1-6 and the other is prophecy from him in this apocalyptic vein in chapters 7-12.

II. History of Daniel (1:1-21).

A. Exiled to Babylon.

Chapter 1 begins with the story of his being taken into Babylon. Now Daniel may have been taken into Babylon even earlier than Ezekiel. Ezekiel was taken into Babylonian captivity in one of the early waves of captivity, in 598 B.C., and Daniel may have gone into exile at that time. But it is also quite possible that Daniel was taken into captivity even earlier in one of the very small token captivities that the Babylonians imposed upon the Judeans. The Babylonian practice was often to take some nobles, some members of the royal family, some of the capable leaders in the society, some of the best craftsmen, and exile them, and use them for their own benefit back in Babylon. This was useful to the Babylonians from a selfish point of view, but was also a warning to the population that they were conquering, that "we will take the rest of you just like we have taken these few people, if you do not kowtow to us, and if you do not pay our heavy toll, taxes, and tribute."

B. In Service to the King.

We find Daniel at the turn of the century, sometime around 600 B.C., in Babylon. We find him there placed into the service of the king, Nebuchadnezzar. We also find his three associates, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, whom we better know from the names they were given in Babylon and most commonly used: Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. It was the practice of the Babylonians, as many conquering peoples did, to take the cream of the crop of their conquered countries and give them jobs in Babylon. They needed people who knew the local languages of all the territories that they conquered, and there were dozens and dozens of languages and dialects. They needed them as translators, they needed them as advisors, and they needed them to write letters and to compose documents that would relate to the administration of the Babylonians over those conquered territories.

But, they also needed them actually as civil servants, as members of the diplomatic corp, as functionaries within what we might call the Department of State. Daniel and Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were groomed for this kind of purpose. Immediately, the faithfulness of Daniel and his associates shows and that faithfulness gets Daniel a reputation. Among other things, something so simple as their diet is of significance. The government is happy to feed these people what they think are the very best foods, what we would think might constitute something of a junk-food diet, but Daniel says, "No, just give us vegetables. We will eat good, solid vegetables; we will not eat your rich, refined foods."

C. Four Servants of Yahweh,

At the end of a period of time (as we know in our day with a bit of knowledge of nutrition as we have it), Daniel looked a lot better than the others who were being groomed for government. He looked a lot healthier with all those vitamins and minerals in him and, as a result, impressed people. But that is only a symbol, a token of the fact that here was a person who was upright in character, who was mannerly, who was responsible, who worked hard to complete the assignments given to him; and so the king took notice of these people.

We are told he found none equal to Daniel and Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, so they entered the king's service. In every matter of wisdom and understanding about which the king questioned them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and enchanters in his whole kingdom. The Babylonians, like their predecessors the Assyrians, were people who engaged a great deal in what we call the occult. They thought anybody who could do tricks or do magic or claimed to be able to do so was worth listening to. But here these young Jews were, in fact, ten times better because they spoke with the wisdom of God, not the trickery and cleverness and gimmickry of magicians and soothsayers and the like.

III. Nebuchadnezzar's First Dream: An Awesome Statue (2:1-49).

A. Joseph and Daniel: A Comparison.

In chapter 2, we read of a dream that Nebuchadnezzar had. Daniel is somewhat like Joseph. In the book of Genesis, Joseph is given by God the special ability to interpret dreams, and it allows him to advance in the civil service and become more and more prominent in a captivity of the Israelites in Egypt. Daniel does effectively the same, as God recreates that same kind of situation in the captivity of the Israelites in Babylon. Joseph was kind of an advance man for the people of Israel going down into Egypt, and Daniel is kind of an advance man for them, as they, much later, will be taken into captivity in Babylon.

B. Tell Me My Dream.

Nebuchadnezzar's dream is not all that complicated a dream in terms of what he saw; it was a dream of a statue that had various parts to it. Apparently, Nebuchadnezzar had been growing suspicious of the magicians and Chaldean soothsayers who alleged they could interpret dreams. After he had this dream that deeply impressed itself upon him, because, of course, God made it so, he wanted his advisors to not only interpret the dream, which they could easily have done (they could have made up an interpretation after thinking it over for a day), but he wanted to

see if they really knew their stuff. So he said, "Do not just give me the interpretation, but tell me what my dream was."

Well the king's advisors' reaction was, "Nobody can do this, O king! There is no way that anybody can do that, no astrologer, no enchanter, no diviner, no magician can ever do such a thing. This is impossible! You are telling us to tell you what the dream was, let alone its interpretation." Well, there was a plan to put to death all the advisors to the king, all the wise men. But Daniel said, "Please give me a chance." He appeared before the king, and acknowledging his total indebtedness to God to do so, he not only told the king what he had dreamed, but also what the interpretation was.

C. The Interpretation.

The interpretation of the dream had to do with the various successive kingdoms that would come upon the earth, the final kingdom being the kingdom of God's people, the saints of the most high. Now, Daniel was firmly established as one who could represent the truth and then gain the favor of King Nebuchadnezzar. So here you have a very tyrannical king, a despot, one who subjugated nations under his wrath, one who would be the conqueror of Judah and Jerusalem. But you also have Daniel, a righteous individual knowing God's will and able to function as God's prophet, in there to help the king understand what the truth would be, but all the more so to help the Israelites, the true people of God (and us many centuries later), understand what God's truth would be, what God's plan was among the nations of the world and among their empires.

IV. Nebuchadnezzar's Pride: Worship My Image (3:1-30).

In the third chapter, King Nebuchadnezzar, in his typical arrogance, sets up a statue of himself, which he wants people to worship. It is only partly of himself, but he is getting this kind of obeisance from the people, and insists that when they hear the music that introduces the worship times, they are to bow down to the statue. Daniel and Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego are not going to do it; and in particular, it is the three advisors who are functioning in this case. Daniel is not prominent in this story. The king finds out that they have not been bowing down to him and has them put to the punishment that he prescribes for it, the heating up of a super furnace, a great big, hot furnace.

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego are thrown in, but they do not die; indeed, it appears that an angel comes and accompanies them. Some people have mistakenly interpreted the words of Nebuchadnezzar to be describing Christ in that fiery furnace. He says, "one like a son of god." This terminology in Babylonian and Hebrew is for an angel, not necessarily the Son of God. But at any rate, God delivers them miraculously, and they come out with not even the smell of fire on their clothing. This causes Nebuchadnezzar to praise the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, and to promote them. So Daniel on the one hand and Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego are beginning to rise up in the civil service. They are becoming administrators, not just local functionaries but now have substantial administrative responsibilities within the empire.

V. Vision and Humbling of Nebuchadnezzar (4:1-37).

In chapter 4, there is a vision of a great tree, which Daniel again interprets for the king. This interpretation allows the king, and those involved, and us, to see again that God will control things in such a way that even Nebuchadnezzar will be subject to God's control. It is a reminder that even the most wicked, despotic, and powerful emperor is fully subject to God and will do only what God allows him to do.

VI. Handwriting on the Wall (5:1-30).

A. Belshazzar Parties.

In chapter 5, there is the famous story of the handwriting on the wall. The time is now just near 540 B.C., when the Babylonians are going to be conquered by the Persians. The Persians have already taken a lot of the Babylonian Empire away and they are marching on Babylon. Irresponsibly, Belshazzar, and thousands of his nobles, are getting drunk and feasting. It is sort of going down into defeat, blotted from any real responsibility for the situation. At the feast, to their horror, they see just a hand without any arm or body attached to it, and that hand is writing something on the wall. The words can be interpreted variously; nobody can figure them out until Daniel is brought in, but he explains that it is the end of the kingdom.

B. Babylon Falls.

That very night, indeed the city of Babylon fell to the Persians, who were round about it; Daniel's words were, in fact, the true ones. His interpretation of that laconic, terse writing on the wall did explain what the future would be. This meant, of course, that now that the Babylonians had been conquered, it was the new empire that was in charge and Daniel would now relate to them.

VII. Daniel Under Darius (6:1-28).

A. Persian Control.

The new empire was that of the Persians. So Daniel had probably been born during the time that the Assyrians were in power. He had lived most of his life under the Babylonians, but now as an older adult he was coming into his own as an advisor to yet another group of people, this time the Persians. We see, in chapter 6, Daniel functioning with King Darius.

Darius had Daniel as his virtual prime minister, very parallel to the situation with Joseph in the book of Genesis again. But Darius got talked into a rather foolish decree. It was the practice of the Medes and the Persians that if they made a law, they could not change it; they had to let that law stand. This was an attempt to have law stability, but it also could make it very difficult if you could never repeal a law. Darius made the law, as he was flattered into doing so, that no one could make any prayer or petition to any god or king except him for a month.

B. Daniel's Loyalty to God.

Daniel's loyalty was always to God. He would do anything he could to help and promote and benefit those who he was working with. He was loyal and faithful and hard working as an advisor and in his responsibilities in the kingdom of Darius, the kingdom of the Persians. But he was not going to compromise on his faith. So that decree he could not keep; and as usual he

went to his home and he faced Jerusalem in symbolic significance of his loyalty to the Lord, the God of Israel, and he prayed to Him. When this was found out, people turned him in (this was something that they had wanted to do all along) and said, "Look, he has violated your law."

Now Darius, who liked Daniel and was glad to have him as his prime minister, did not know what to do. But basically, he had no choice except to throw Daniel into the lion pit where the punishment was death, because the lions were fed that way. The next morning, when the king rushed to the lion pit to see if by any chance this man of God with such a reputation, with all these amazing skills, with this dream interpreting ability, and with this faithfulness that he was famous for, might be alive. He found Daniel to be just fine. We know he had not made any law against throwing those who had turned Daniel in, who had plotted against him in the first place, into the den of lions; and when they were thrown in, they were grabbed by the lions before hitting the ground and devoured.

That is the end of the stories about Daniel. They are stories of God's providence and protection, stories of how Daniel and his associates Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego stayed faithful, stayed steady, stayed obedient, loved God, and cared first for His kingdom above any other, even though they came to prominence in the greatest kingdom of that day.

VIII. Daniel's Vision of the Four Beasts (7:1-28).

Then the second part of the bifid structure kicks in, as it were, and here comes the apocalyptic materials in chapters 7-12. Daniel has dreams and visions. There is a dream/vision in chapter 7 about four weird animals, all of them represent kingdoms that give way to God's kingdom.

IX. Vision of Ram and Male Goat (8:1-27).

In chapter 8, he has a vision of a ram and a male goat. But as you read about the vision and study what is in there and how God gives him an understanding of it, we begin to see that this vision tells us that even the kingdom that he was not part of, the kingdom of the Medes and the Persians, would eventually pass away. What kingdom would replace it? Well, indeed, the kingdom of God under the jurisdiction of His Messiah, the saints of God are going to win, they are the ones. It is being revealed in this apocalyptic literature who is going to have the final rule. We know how the New Testament shows us this coming and fulfillment, as the books of the New Testament describe the reign of the people of God along with Christ, in His kingdom.

X. Vision of the Seventy "Sevens" (9:1-27).

Chapter 9 contains some material classic of apocalyptic. There are some numbers involved in a prediction of seventy weeks. Basically, the purpose of this prediction housed in terms of seventy weeks is to describe a desolation that is going to come before the last, great, final victory of God. This is important for us, because that desolation is something that we know goes on in the world. These are not things that are predicted only as if they have no connection with us, but they are ways of talking about the march of history that affects us as well as those in the future. The wonderful thing is that in the final analysis, when the end finally comes and all the desolations have been done away with, then there will be blessing as we have it described for us in the final part of the book, chapters 10-12.

XI. Daniel's Final Vision (10:1-12:13).

A. Israel's Future (10:1-11 :45).

Chapter 10 is especially fascinating because it says that in the third year of Cyrus, who of course was the first of the great Persian kings, Daniel had a special revelation in which he saw a great figure, a very large figure there: a man dressed in linen, with a belt of the finest gold around his waist, his body shining like chrysolite, his face like lightening, his eyes like torches, and so on, a brilliant, bright picture. And the sound when he speaks was like that of a multitude speaking, a tremendous roaring voice as this person speaks. Well, is this a vision of God? No, it does not turn out to be, because as we read on we find that this appears to be the angel Gabriel. And what does Gabriel talk about?

Well, he talks about the fact that God is working out His purposes in and among the nations and empires of the world. He says, "Since the first day that you set your mind to gain understanding and to humble yourself before your God, your words were heard." In other words, "Daniel, your prayers have made a difference. God's been listening to all those prayers." And he says, "I, Gabriel, have come in response to them. But the prince of the Persian kingdom resisted me for twenty-one days. Then Michael, one of the chief princes (that is, the archangel Michael in the Bible), came to help me, because I was detained here with the king of Persia. Now I have come to explain to you what will happen to your people in the future, for the vision concerns a time yet to come."

What is going on here? The answer is that Daniel is being allowed to see that God's angels are at work in the world. They are influencing the king; they are taking care of Cyrus and what his needs are. They are suppressing his bad tendencies; they are keeping him from being worse than he actually is; they are channeling his efforts to the good. They are influencing what Media and Persia do; they are influencing the shape of things for the future. And of course, one of the wonderful things that they did was to influence Cyrus to make that famous decree that we read about at the end of 2 Chronicles and the beginning of the book of Ezra, the decree that the captured peoples go home and that specifically, the Jews could go back to Judah and could rebuild the temple, and it would even be financed, in part, by money from the Persian treasury.

God was at work among His people. Even though they had been captured, and were exiled, and were under foreign domination, this was not something that God did not know about. It did not represent a defeat for God. He was not limited in His power. We see further in these chapters how God's angels influence, in general, the affairs of men, how they make sure that no nation, no matter how evil, gets too evil. They make sure that the worst sorts of things that people might do on the earth are prevented. Now there are various kings who will come and go; even the part of the story of the kingdom of Greece is described for us. But, in the final analysis, no matter what these kings do, no matter what they think they are able to do, no matter how these empires take shape, they are all subject to God. He is always in charge. Everything that happens, He superintends and sees to and checks properly, as it needs to be checked and overseen.

B. End Times (12:1-13).

These visions are visions of Israel's future and the end times, and there is a wonderful encouragement for all of us in chapter 12, the last chapter of the book. What we see in this prediction from Gabriel is this: "At that time Michael, the great prince who protects your people, will arise. There will be a time of distress such as has not happened from the beginning of nations until then." That distress, of course, was earlier on in the book described as well. "But at that time your people, everyone whose name is found written in the book (what we know as the book of life from the New Testament book of Revelation), will be delivered. Multitudes will sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt. Those who are wise will shine like the brightness of the heavens, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever." What a hope! What a future from the book of Daniel!