

The Book of Daniel
Lesson 6 Daniel 2:31-45
Daniel Interprets Nebuchadnezzar's Dream

Introduction

As we continue in Daniel 2:31-45 today, we find Daniel standing before the king, confidently ready to reveal the mysterious and frightening dream which Nebuchadnezzar found himself so troubled by. With boldness and humility, Daniel had expressed to the king that his ability to reveal the dream had not come from within himself- It was ***the God of heaven who revealed mysteries (vs 28)***, who had provided him with the wisdom. This God of heaven, had a message for Nebuchadnezzar, and through his sovereign wisdom, had equipped Daniel to be his mouthpiece.

Interestingly, while the God of heaven had taken a special interest in the heart of Nebuchadnezzar (2:30, 4:28-37), He also had a much grander purpose for the dream as well. Through the dream, God had planned to outline in his Word the historical program that would follow Israel's judgment. While the kingdom of Israel had played the primary role in God's narrative story up to this point, all of that was changing. The time of the Gentiles (Luke 21:24) had commenced, and Israel's central role as God's messenger to the world was being set aside for a time. Yet God was not done with Israel. He would still be faithful to His people, and was continuing to assure them that He would certainly fulfill all of the promises He had made to them and more. Yet for the time being, God wanted his people to understand his plan for their future. Through this mysterious dream God would reveal that four successive Gentile kingdoms would come to dominate the nation for a time. Yet Israel should not lose heart- all of this was merely a prelude to the climactic event that all of history was leading to- the ushering in of God's kingdom led by Messiah, when Jew and Gentile believers would serve alongside each other as fellow heirs of God's grace.

The Dream Revealed (vs 31-35)

Verse 31 starts with Daniel descriptively revealing the alarming content of Nebuchadnezzar's dream. Immediately what comes forth is that the king has been in

the presence of a horribly frightening image, a statue that was **“mighty and exceedingly bright”** so disturbing that the king was left completely overwhelmed and physically shaken. This foreboding structure shined with awesome brilliance, for it was made of four different types of metals. From the top down, the head was made of fine gold, the chest and arms of silver, the middle and thighs of bronze, the legs of iron, and the feet a mixture of iron and clay. Walvoord adds to this by explaining, “The preciousness of the metal deteriorates from the top, or gold, to the clay, or feet, and there is corresponding lower gravity; that is the gold is much heavier than the silver, the silver than the brass, the brass than the iron, and the clay in the feet is the lightest material of all... While the materials decrease in weight, they increase in hardness, with the notable exception of the clay feet. The image is obviously top heavy and weak in the feet.”

After describing the statue, Daniel then proceeds to explain what happened to the statue in the dream. He told the king, **“You continued watching until a stone was broken off without hands, and it struck the statue on its feet of iron and clay, and crushed them. Then the iron, the clay, the bronze, the silver, and the gold were crushed to pieces all at the same time, and they were like chaff from the summer threshing floors; and the wind carried them away so that not a trace of them was found. But the stone that struck the statue became a great mountain and filled the entire earth.” (vs 34-35)** Here we see a unique stone, of no human origin, destroy the statue by a simple blow to the feet. By an undisclosed force, the stone was thrown at the statue causing it to topple and then fully disintegrate. Yet, the dream gets even more dramatic when the very stone which struck the image, takes on a life of its own by becoming a great mountain that dominates the landscape of the earth. Nebuchadnezzar is clearly attentive to all Daniel has said, for without a word he allows him to continue on with the dream’s interpretation.

The latter days and the time of Gentile domination

As was previously discussed, Daniel had already disclosed to the king that the dream was about **“what will be in the latter days” (vs 28)**. The phrase “latter days” is a significant concept throughout Scripture, so understanding its meaning can provide great insight into the passage. Explaining the phrase, Walvoord writes, “ Robert Culver’s

definition (of the latter days) is accurate that the expression 'refers to the future of God's dealings with mankind as to be consummated and concluded historically in the times of Messiah.' He goes on to point out that the expression always has in view the ultimate establishment of the Messianic kingdom on earth, even though 'the latter days', include an event now history, such as the division of Israel in the promised land. On the basis of Scriptural usage in the Old Testament, it can be concluded that the expression is larger than the Messianic times specifically, but that it always includes that element in its consummation."

With this in mind, it is clear that God was disclosing what would come before the climax of human history- the kingdom of God ruled by Messiah. Specifically, the dream would highlight that four Gentile kingdoms would rule over Israel before Messiah's all encompassing reign. As MacArthur explains, "As we look at Daniel 2:31 and the following verses, we are going to see the great history of the world under Gentile rule. Jesus referred to this time as ***"the times of the Gentiles"*** which had already begun and would come to an end at his return. The period of time when the nation of Israel was under bondage to some degree or another to Gentile world power began with the Babylonian captivity and will end with the second coming of Jesus Christ. We are living in that time right now. Israel does not possess the fullness of the inheritance as promised in the Palestinian Covenant (Deut. 30:3), nor does it dwell in its land in peace. Gentile nations have dominated that part of the world since Nebuchadnezzar and they will to some degree, hold power until Jesus comes again. The second chapter of Daniel, then indicates that God transfers the leadership of the earth from the Jew and Israel, to the Gentiles. Israel takes a backseat as it goes into captivity, and never returns to its former glory until Jesus returns. Israel should have set the pattern as the leader of the world. They should have been the very special people that God originally intended them to be, through whom were given the law and the ordinances, and the covenants and the promises (Rom. 9:4). Israel should have been God's messenger to the world but Israel tragically failed." Of course, Nebuchadnezzar's interest in the dream had more to do with self preservation than anything else, yet God in his sovereignty chose to use this Gentile king to give a message of hope to his people.

The first kingdom: Babylon (605 BC- 539 BC)

In verse 36, Daniel begins to interpret the dream, and the first thing he makes clear is that Nebuchadnezzar and his kingdom of Babylon, is the head of gold. He says plainly, ***“You, O king, are the king of kings, to whom the God of heaven has given the kingdom, the power, the strength, and the honor; and wherever the sons of mankind live, or the animals of the field, or the birds of the sky, He has handed them over to you and has made you ruler over them all. You are the head of gold.”*** Through this description, we see that while Nebuchadnezzar had immense power at the time, and was the greatest king on earth, all of that power and influence had been given to him by God. As Paul would say later, ***“For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God.” (Rom. 13:1)***

While Nebuchadnezzar refused to acknowledge God’s authority at this time, his kingdom continued to grow and flourish just as Daniel had described. Over the course of his 43 year reign, Babylon became one of the greatest kingdoms that had ever existed. As Leon Wood explains, “Nebuchadnezzar was uniquely responsible for Babylonia’s attaining and maintaining empire status. After him, its power diminished rapidly. It was far more his kingdom, than he was its king. The same was not true of any ruler of succeeding empires.” While Nebuchadnezzar’s reign lasted only 43 years, his kingdom did continue on for 27 more. Yet the years after Nebuchadnezzar were characterized by significant decline, which opened the way for the Persians to take control in 539 BC. Interestingly, this was the exact year that God had promised to release his people from their captivity, and just as God had promised it happened.

Of additional note, the biblical identification of Nebuchadnezzar with the head of gold is extraordinary because of what history reveals. Herodotus, an ancient historian, visited Babylon 90 years after the era of Nebuchadnezzar and documented that he had never witnessed such an abundance of gold as he saw in Babylon. He described temple idols, vessels, and a wide range of other items that were made of solid gold throughout the Babylonian Empire- and this was 90 years after the era of Nebuchadnezzar! And as we will soon learn, Daniel 3 records that the image Nebuchadnezzar demanded his subjects to worship was also made of gold, further demonstrating that the dream’s interpretation was prophetically accurate.

The second kingdom: Medo-Persia (539 BC- 331 BC)

In verse 39, God revealed that another kingdom would arise right after Babylon, and that it would be *“inferior.”* Commentators are mixed in their explanation of what the word inferior implies, yet Calvin seemed to be onto something when he remarked, “We see then that this kingdom is not called inferior through having less splendor or opulence in humane estimation, but because the general condition of the world was worse under the second monarchy, as men’s vices and corruption increase more and more.” In keeping with this idea, Miller agrees and says that indeed this is the pattern that each successive kingdom followed for “according to Daniel the words kingdoms are not moving toward utopia but in the opposite direction.”

So who was this second kingdom that replaced Babylon at the end of their glorious reign? Miller continues, “History is plain that the next great power to appear on the world scene was the Medo-Persian Empire led by the dynamic Cyrus the Great. This empire is symbolized by the silver chest and arms of the great statue, the two arms conceivably representing the two parts or divisions of the empire. Medo-Persian dominance continued for approximately 208 years.” Under Persian control, the Jews were allowed to return to their land, even to rebuild their temple and worship freely. Yet as God had promised, their former glory was never restored, and Gentile kingdoms continued to rule over them.

Describing why silver was the metal of choice for the second kingdom in the dream Macarthur writes, “The characteristic of this Medo-Persian empire would be silver, or money. (The two words are synonymous in Semetic languages.) History bears this out. The Medo-Persian Empire developed a vast system of taxation, which required that taxes be paid in silver. Needless to say, the empire’s coffers were filled with tons and tons of silver as its kings gobbled up silver money. Xerxes, who inherited the incredible silver fortune of his father Darius, as well as from other Persian kings, used it to finance his massive war against the Greeks. Clearly, the Medo-Persians accumulated a tremendous amount of silver.” Yet despite the Medo-Persians fixation with silver, there was nothing they could do to prevent God’s sovereign plan from moving forward. In 330 BC, the empire fell to the infamous Alexander the Great, which ushered in the time of the Greeks.

The third kingdom: Greece (331 BC-63 BC)

In verse 39, Daniel continues with his interpretation and explains that “**another third kingdom of bronze,**” would follow the second kingdom and it “**would rule over all the earth.**” Looking back on world history it is clear that the third kingdom’s identity is the Greek Empire. “Between 334 BC and 331 BC Alexander the Great defeated the Persian King Darius III, in three decisive battles that gave him control of the lands of the Persian Empire. The land of Israel thus passed into Greek control in 332 BC (Daniel 8:5-7, 20-21;11:3). Alexander permitted the Jews in Judea to observe their laws and granted them an exemption from taxes during their sabbatical years. However, Alexander sought to bring Greek culture, called “Hellenism,” to the lands he conquered. He wished to create a world united by Greek language and thinking. This policy, carried on by Alexander’s successors, was as dangerous to the religion of Israel as the cult of Baal had been, because the Greek way of life was attractive, sophisticated, and humanly appealing, but utterly ungodly.” (Macarthur Study Bible) While Alexander the Great only reigned for 13 years, his power and dominance were unprecedented. By the time he reached his early thirties, he controlled Egypt, parts of Europe, and most of the land from Asia Minor to India. It is also fascinating to note that the name he commanded people to call him was “Alexander, king of all the earth,” further underscoring the prophetic reliability of the dream (vs 39). Following his death, the Greek Empire divided, yet continued on for more than 300 years. During this time, Israel was governed by various governors- all of which sought to Hellenize the Israelites. Much more could be said about this time in Israel’s history. Yet more time will be devoted to it in future lessons, for prophecies in Daniel 7, 8, and 11 deal with this time period. What should be known now is that all that was prophesied by Daniel did come to pass with exact precision.

As for the bronze belly and thighs that symbolized the Greek empire, history reveals why this metal was chosen to represent the kingdom. Referencing the army of the Greeks, one author says, “It is easy to imagine what an astonishing impression the Greeks must have made on the civilized world. Consider the contrast between their soldiers and the soldiers of the Persian army. Had you seen a soldier of Media or Persia in the days when they controlled the civilized world, he would have looked like this: On his head would have been a soft turban like covering. He would have been clothed with

a tunic with sleeves and trousers full and long. That would have been a Medo-Persian soldier. But when you saw a Greek soldier, he would have had on his head a helmet of brass, on his body a breastplate of brass. Before him he would be carrying a shield of brass and a sword made out of brass. That is why the classic writers of ancient days refer to the brazen-coated Greeks. Brass became a sign and symbol of Greek conquest and Greek empire.” (Dr. W.A. Criswall)

The fourth kingdom: Rome (63 BC- 476 AD) and Rome Revived

In verse 40 Daniel says to the king, **“Then there will be a fourth kingdom as strong as iron; just as iron smashes and crushes everything, so, like iron that crushes, it will smash and crush all these things.”** Here we see that the kingdom that would follow Greece, symbolized by the statue’s iron legs, would be marked by tremendous power that would crush all that it came into contact with. Clearly, this is the Roman empire. In 63 BC, Rome officially took control of the land of Palestine, and continued to dominate the world stage for over 500 years. The significance of the iron used to represent Rome, cannot be overstated for it is the perfect metal to signify how Rome operated. As Miller explains, “Rome ruled the nations with an iron hand and like a huge iron club shattered all who resisted its will. The Roman empire dominated the world from the defeat of Carthage in 146 BC, to the division of the East and West empires in AD 395, approximately 500 years. The last Roman emperor ruled in the West empires in AD 476, and the Eastern division of the empire continued until AD 1453.” Another author explains, “The Roman legions were known for their ability to crush all resistance with an iron heel. There is apparently little that is constructive in the program of this empire in spite of Roman law and Roman roads and civilization, because the destructive work outweighs all else for we have the double verb **‘crush and demolish.’**” This destructive and powerful dominance is what allowed Rome to continue on for so long.

Yet it is important to understand that while the Roman Empire did eventually fade from the world stage, it was never conquered like the other kingdoms. Macarthur explains this by saying, “Rome was never conquered by any other world empire... In the eastern part of the empire, it took 1,500 years before they finally kind of faded out. I believe the Bible tells us they went into an abeyance. Their head was wounded as if

they were dead only to rise again in the future.” What he is saying here is supported by many other commentators, as well as various other Scriptural references (Daniel 7:7, 19-27, Rev. 12:3,13:1,17:9-10) And this historical framework provides the clue to grasping what verses 41-43 mean. **“And in that you saw the feet and toes, partly of potter’s clay and partly of iron, it will be a divided kingdom; but it will have within it some of the toughness of iron, since you saw the iron mixed with common clay. And just as the toes of the feet were partly of iron and partly of pottery, so some of the kingdom will be strong, and part of it will be fragile. In that you saw the iron mixed with common clay, they will combine with one another in their descendants; but they will not adhere to one another, just as iron does not combine with pottery.”** Here we see that the feet and toes of the fourth kingdom (Rome) were a mixture of clay and iron, making it more vulnerable in its final form. While commentators vary on their interpretations of this difficult text, there is a strong biblical argument to be made that the dream is indicating that Rome will somehow revive in the future, with ten representative nations forming some sort of alliance. Yet this alliance will be weak, and most importantly will be catastrophically demolished by one fatal blow. Daniel 7 and Revelation 13 and 17 all speak of these same events, each bringing more clarity to what will unfold right before the time of Christ’s return.

Additionally, it is fascinating to note that in recent times there has been a strong push in Europe for a coalition of this sort to form. As Robert Culver writes, “Two millenia ago, Rome gave the world the ecumenical unity that the League of Nations and the United Nations organizations have sought to revive in our time..They are revivals of the ancient Roman ideal that never since the time of Augustus Caesar has been wholly lost.”

The Messianic Kingdom

Last but not least, Daniel explains in vs 44-45 what the stone that destroyed the statue, then turned into a mountain signifies. **“And in the days of those kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom which will never be destroyed, and that kingdom will not be left for another people; it will crush and put an end to all these kingdoms, but it will itself endure forever. Just as you saw that a stone was broken off from the mountain without**

hands, and that it crushed the iron, the bronze, the clay, the silver, and the gold, the great God has made known to the king what will take place in the future; so the dream is certain and its interpretation is trustworthy.” Here we see Daniel reaching the climax of the dream, and explaining the identity of the stone that crushed the statue. Miller explains these truths well. The following list is a general summary of his key points:

1. The final kingdom will be established **“in the time of those kings”** meaning the establishment of Christ’s kingdom at his second advent will come during the end time phase of the Roman Empire.
2. The final kingdom will be of divine origin- **“the God of heaven”** will establish it.
3. The final kingdom will be eternal. **“Left to another kingdom”** refers to the fact that when each of the four empires was destroyed, it was absorbed by other nations. By way of contrast, no one will ever be able to conquer the coming kingdom of God and possess it. It is the indestructible and eternal kingdom of Christ.
4. The final kingdom is best understood to be the literal earthly reign of Christ, inaugurated at his second advent. Some scholars interpret this kingdom to be Christ’s invisible, spiritual reign in the hearts of believers established at his first advent and evident in the church (amillennialism). Others view the kingdom of God as gradually overcoming the world through the influence of God’s people resulting in a golden age upon the earth, at the end of which Christ will return (postmillennialism). For a wide range of biblical reasons it is best to follow the first view- that there will be a future millennial kingdom of Christ that will continue into the eternal state. The kingdom will begin after the 7 year tribulation when Christ returns (premillennialism). This view tends to flow out of a hermeneutic that seeks to take the Bible in a literal and natural sense, rather than over spiritualize or allegorize key passages related to eschatology.

Conclusion

As we continue on in our study of Daniel, we will be covering more content that deals with the same truths covered in Nebuchadnezzar's dream. For example, chapter 7 contains Daniel's vision of the four beasts, which also covers the time of the Gentiles when the four earthly kingdoms would rule over Israel. This vision, along with all the others, reveal that God is always reigning over history, and has a precise plan for how it will unfold. That being said, working our way through all of this prophetic content can be laborious! Yet understanding the richness of the truth can also be life changing. Considering this idea, Roy B. Zuck posed the question in his book *Basics of Bible Interpretation*: why should we study prophecy? Scripture gives us several encouraging answers to this question: prophecy comforts (I Thes. 4:18), prophecy calms (2 Tim. 3:1-5, Titus 2:13), prophecy converts (Acts 3:12-26, 4:4, 17:31), prophecy cleanses (Titus 2:14, 2 Peter 3:14, I John 3:2-3), prophecy compels (2 Cor. 5:10, 14), and prophecy clarifies. Each of these stand alone as valid reasons to dive deep into God's Word, but we may find God using the prophetic passages of Scripture to accomplish all of them.

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Why does the dream seem to pass over the present age we are living in?

Old Testament prophecy in general does not deal with the period between Christ's first and second advent. Thus in the Book of Daniel the period between ancient Rome (the time of Christ's first coming) and Rome's final phase (immediately preceding Christ's return) is not described. This is a reason why Paul explained that the church age was a mystery prior to Christ's incarnation (Ephesians 3). While this may seem odd, it was not unusual for Old Testament authors to lump together predictions concerning the first and second coming of Christ, without regard for the millenia that lay between (Luke 4:17-19, Isaiah 61:1-2). Summary from both Miller and Walvoord