

Route 66

Daniel: Deported but Devoted

Part 27 - January 10, 2010



After Solomon, the Jewish nation split into Israel in the north and Judah in the south. These are the 19 kings of Judah and their reigns. The blue kings “did right in the eyes of the Lord”. The grey dots represent Isaiah’s ministry; the yellow dots are Jeremiah’s. During Jeremiah’s ministry, Egypt overpowers Judah and puts Jehoiakim on the throne.

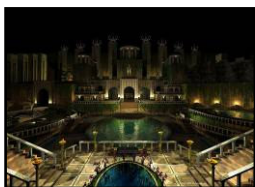
However, a 29-year-old prince leads his forces against the Egyptians and ultimately conquers them. In that same year the prince’s father dies, so he returns home to Babylon to ascend the throne ... as King Nebuchadnezzar.

In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it. - *Daniel 1:1 NIV*

Jehoiakim switches allegiance to Babylon and surrenders sacred temple vessels to be taken to the shrine of Nebuchadnezzar’s god.

Then the king ordered Ashpenaz [ASH-peh-naz], chief of his court officials, to bring in some of the Israelites from the royal family and the nobility – young men without any physical defect, handsome, showing aptitude for every kind of learning ... - *Daniel 1:3-4a NIV*

Among these captives is a teenager named Daniel and his friends Hananiah [HAN-uh-NIGH-uh], Mishael [MISH-eh-uhl], and Azariah [az-uh-RIGH-uh]. Everything in their young lives was turned upside down that day.



As Daniel was being torn from his family and home, he clung to his faith in God. He had no idea that his devotion was destined by God to impact pagan kings and nations and empires. They were taken to the palace to be trained. Babylon was the OT’s Hollywood! And they were thrust into it and given new identities.

Daniel became Beltshazzar [bel-tih-SHAZ-uhr], and his three friends became Shadrac, Meshach, and Abednego. But in spite of many temptations they keep themselves pure, even refusing all food but vegetables so as not to violate God’s law. And they grew in wisdom and understanding above all others.

The king talked with them, and he found none equal to Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah ... - *Daniel 1:19a NIV*

One night, Nebuchadnezzar has a nightmare, so he calls for his magicians and conjurers to interpret it. But, he's cynical about their "powers" so he refuses to tell them what the dream was! When they say it's impossible, he orders the execution of all the wise men in Babylon. But, when Daniel is told he's about to be executed, he asks for an opportunity to go to his God.



So, he's given one night. At this point he's probably still in his teens. He goes back to the dorm and the boys pray like crazy and go to bed – and sure enough, God shows Daniel the answer. He wakes and rushes to the king to describe his dream: "It was a statue with a golden head, a chest and arms of silver, a belly and thighs of bronze, legs of iron, and feet of iron and clay. And a rock was cut out, not by human hands, and it destroyed the statue, and then the rock filled the whole earth! Am I right?!" And he said, "You are the head of Gold. But, three more world powers must come before God establishes his eternal kingdom. My king, God has shown you the future!"

Then King Nebuchadnezzar fell prostrate before Daniel and paid him honor and ordered that an offering and incense be presented to him. The king said to Daniel, "Surely your God is the God of gods and the Lord of kings ..." - *Daniel 2:46-47a NIV*

The king gave Daniel riches and made him ruler over the entire province of Babylon and put him in charge of all the wise men. (*This is where the wise men from the east will come.*)



But the king didn't worship the God of Daniel. Instead he built a ninety foot tall golden image, and summoned his officials to a special dedication where they would all have to worship it. To give you an idea of its size, I have a photo of an *eighty* foot tall statue. When the time comes to bow before the image, the king's astrologers denounce the Jews and then point out three very non-bowing young men: Shadrac, Meshach, and Abednego. The king commands them to bow or face being thrown into the fiery furnace.

[They replied] If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to save us from it, and he will rescue us from your hand, O king. But even if he does not, we want you to know, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up. - *Daniel 3:17-18 NIV*

Now *that's* faith: "the God we serve is able to save us", "But even if he does not". They trust in the ultimate dependability of God to do what's right – though it may not seem right, right now.

The furnace is stoked seven times hotter than usual. The soldiers who throw them in die instantly from the blast of heat. But when the king looks in he sees them walking in the fire with a fourth man who looks like a son of the gods! So he calls them out of the furnace and they don't even smell like smoke.

And Nebuchadnezzar praises them for trusting in their God:



Therefore I decree that the people of any nation or language who say anything against the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego be cut into pieces and their houses be turned into piles of rubble ...
- *Daniel 3:29 NIV*

He doesn't quite get the whole grace of God thing.

Meanwhile in Judah, King Jehoiakim rebels, causing Nebuchadnezzar to exile Ezekiel and 10,000 Jews. Daniel probably had a hand in keeping the easily furious king from *destroying* Jerusalem. But eleven years later, when King Zedekiah pulls the same stunt, there's no stopping Nebuchadnezzar from destroying the city.

Nebuchadnezzar has another dream that Daniel interprets as a warning from God that he must repent before God, or be struck with insanity and crawl around like an animal eating grass.



Twelve months later, as the king was walking on the roof of the royal palace of Babylon, he said, "Is not this the great Babylon I have built as the royal residence, by my mighty power and for the glory of my majesty?" - *Daniel 4:29-30 NIV*

Guess who crawls around naked eating grass (until his nails become like claws)? When it passes he's restored, a much humbler king. These are the last recorded words from the king:

Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and exalt and glorify the King of heaven, because everything he does is right and all his ways are just. - *Daniel 4:37a NIV*

Just think, God was using Jeremiah in Jerusalem, Ezekiel with the exiles, and Daniel in the very government of Babylon!

Nebuchadnezzar dies and his son reigns for two years until his brother-in-law murders him. Four years later *he's* replaced by another son of Nebuchadnezzar who makes his *own son* co-regent. This co-regent grandson of Nebuchadnezzar is Belshazzar [bel-SHAZ-uhr].



And during his 14 year reign, Daniel has a vision of four wild beasts that parallels the statue dream. Nebuchadnezzar's is the human view of the empires' splendor. Daniel's is God's view. And like the rock in the statue dream, Daniel sees an eternal kingdom coming through a man:

He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed. - *Daniel 7:14 NIV*

In a vision of a ram and a goat, God show's Daniel who the next two super-powers will be. Babylon was the head. But a ram with two horns represents the Medo-Persian Empire. And the ram is destroyed by a shaggy goat which is Greece. The goat's large horn is then replaced by four smaller horns. The Babylonian Empire *was* ended by the Medo-Persians, who *were* crushed by Alexander the Great. And when Alexander died unexpectedly at 33, his kingdom divided into four power blocks.

Daniel doesn't name the iron legs with the mixed iron and clay feet that God told him represented divided kingdom with a mixture of people. But, we know that Rome was the next to rise. Interestingly, it's often referred to as the *iron monarchy*, and was never able to unite its diverse conquered territories, and was characterized by division and deterioration. And of course, it was during the time of the Roman Empire that Christ, the Rock, came to establish his eternal kingdom.

Daniel is even shown when the Messiah will come (*Dan 9:25*) as being seven 'sevens' and sixty-two 'sevens' - that's 483 years - from the decree to rebuild Jerusalem (Artaxerxes decreed it for Nehemiah in 445^{BC}). So, accounting for Daniel's 360 day calendar and leap years, that puts his prediction (of when sin and wickedness will be atoned for) on or about 32^{AD} ... the crucifixion of Christ!

Now, on the eve of Babylon's destruction, Belshazzar throws a drunken feast and uses the sacred vessels from God's Temple.



As they drank the wine, they praised the gods of gold and silver, of bronze, iron, wood and stone. Suddenly the fingers of a human hand appeared and wrote on the plaster of the wall, near the lampstand in the royal palace. - *Daniel 5:4-5a NIV*

This is the inscription that was written: mene, mene, tekel, parsin ... - *Daniel 5:25 NIV*

These were Aramaic currency terms: "Mene" means "numbered". "Tekel" means "weighed". "Parsin" means "divided". So the writing says: "numbered, numbered, weighed, and divided". The terrified king calls in his wise men, but no one can explain what it means. The queen mother remembers an old man who served Nebuchadnezzar with "wisdom like that of the gods." So, Daniel (now in his 80s) is brought in. He rejects the king's offer of reward and condemns him for not humbling himself before God - having had the example of his grandfather, Nebuchadnezzar. And then Daniel effortlessly explains this message from God:

Mene: God has **numbered** the days of your reign and brought it to an end. Tekel: You have been **weighed** on the scales and found wanting. Peres: Your kingdom is **divided** and given to the Medes and Persians. - *Daniel 5:26-28 NIV*

Two popular expressions get their origin from this account: The writing is on the wall (obvious doom is on the way). And: Your days are numbered!



Cyrus the Great

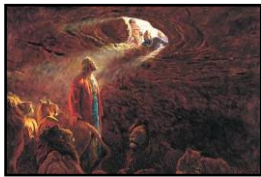
And that very night (October 7, 539^{BC}), Belshazzar is slain in a surprise attack, as the “golden head” fell to the “chest of silver” (with its two arms: the Medes and Persians), led by Cyrus – the man God called by name (*Isaiah 44:28-45:4*), the man who released the exiles and funded the rebuilding of the temple, as Isaiah had prophesied. [See Ezra sermon]

Cyrus put a man named Darius [duh-RIGH-uhs] on the throne so that Cyrus could continue to conquer the world. Because of Daniel’s reputation, Darius made him co-administrator over 120 provincial governors. But his wisdom and honesty was so astonishing, Darius decided to set him over the whole kingdom! So, some jealous politicians play on the king’s pride and convince him to issue an irrevocable decree that everyone must pray only to Darius for the next 30 days or face the lions!



Now when Daniel learned that the decree had been published, he went home to his upstairs room where the windows opened toward Jerusalem. Three times a day he got down on his knees and prayed, giving thanks to his God, just as he had done before. - *Daniel 6:10 NIV*

The connivers turn Daniel in and force the king to act on his own command. Darius is distressed but can’t find any legal loophole to save this wise and trustworthy old man. So Daniel is thrown to the lions. And Darius refuses to eat and he can’t sleep. And at the crack of dawn he races to the den and cries out, “Daniel, has your God been able to rescue you?!” And a voice behind the sealed rock says, “My God sent his angel, and he shut the mouths of the lions.” Overjoyed, Darius brings Daniel out of the den and has all the connivers thrown to the carnivores. And then Darius writes a very different decree and addresses it to “all the peoples, nations, and men of every language throughout the land”:



I issue a decree that in every part of my kingdom people must fear and reverence the God of Daniel. For he is the living God and he endures forever; his kingdom will not be destroyed, his dominion will never end. He rescues and he saves ... - *Daniel 6:26-27a NIV*

And this is how young Daniel grew to influence the *whole* empire, simply by focusing on his own integrity and intimacy with God.

Daniel had more incredible visions, but we gotta stop somewhere!

In the first year of [Darius’] reign, I, Daniel, understood from the Scriptures, according to the word of the Lord given to Jeremiah the prophet, that the desolation of Jerusalem would last seventy years. - *Daniel 9:2 NIV*

Have you ever wondered why God chose *seventy* years? In Leviticus 25, God commands the Jews to give the Promised Land a “Sabbath rest” every seventh year. They can eat the food but they can’t work the land. This was a great benefit to the poor.

But, from King Saul's reign on, they greedily stopped observing the land sabbaths. That's 490 years from King Saul to their release from Cyrus. And what's 490 divided by seven? 70! He had warned them through Moses (before they even entered the Promised Land), what would happen if they rejected his commands:

I will scatter you among the nations ... **Then the land will enjoy its sabbath years all the time that it lies desolate and you are in the country of your enemies;** ... the land will have the rest it did not have during the sabbaths you lived in it. - *Leviticus 26:33-35 NIV*

It was 70 years from the time Nebuchadnezzar took Daniel and the first captives in 605^{BC}, until Cyrus defeated Babylon in 539^{BC} and released them, and they completed their long journey home.

Daniel most likely played a large part in communicating the scriptures to Cyrus and obtaining the release of his people. But now nearing 90, he's too old and too vital to this pagan nation of Babylon to make the trip back to Jerusalem. Though I'm sure there were tears in his eyes as he waved goodbye to the 50,000 friends, family, and fellow Jews who had packed up the sacred temple vessels and were finally heading home.

And when they returned and renewed the covenant, they made those land sabbaths a specific part of their commitment. (*Neh 10:31*)