

Grace Presbyterian Church Bible Studies

Daniel

Welcome to our on-line Bible study for 2016

The Book of Daniel: “Servant of the Living God” (Dan. 6:20)

Chapter 1 – “Ten Times Better Than the Magicians”

The Book of Daniel is an account of living in two worlds. Daniel and his three friends, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, are taken captive to Babylon after the fall of Jerusalem. They were young Israelite nobles who were being prepared for service in the King’s court. This means however that they are in the midst of an idolatrous nation. In this context they will neither retreat from, nor convert to, their new world. Daniel remains a model for us today in our increasing idolatrous society.

I. Into the Den of Ishtar – 1:1-2

Nebuchadnezzar’s conquest of Jerusalem would have been interpreted by him and indeed the whole ancient world as a victory of the gods of Babylon over the God of Israel. Yet this is not the case. The Lord allowed Jerusalem to fall into the hands of the Babylonians (1:2). This was God’s judgment on a rebellious and unfaithful Israel (II Chronicle4s 36:15-21). The vessels that Nebuchadnezzar and his army took from the temple of Jerusalem, before they burned it, are placed in the treasury of the king’s gods. Who were these gods?

The most widely worshipped deity of this period was **Ishtar**. She was a fertility goddess. Such figures were feared and worshipped regularly since it was believed that they guaranteed the cycle of life itself. She was adapted from an earlier fertility goddess named **Inanna**. Ishtar was a more aggressive, even ruthless, figure however than Inanna. She was feared by the other gods because of her ability to control not only the harvest but the fertility of both humans and animals. She had many lovers and was worshipped through ritual prostitution. Her chief consort was **Tammuz**. She spent half the year with him. The other half he was forced to reside in the underworld, the place of death. It was believed that when the two were together the earth became fertile. Crops grew and animals and humans conceived. When they were apart the earth was barren and dry (reflecting the wet and dry seasons of the Middle East).

Ishtar was no stranger to Israel. Solomon had built a temple to her (I Kings 11:5). She was essentially the same as the Asherah which Jezebel promoted in Israel (I Kings 18:19).

The Israelites had followed her cult even praying for the revival of Tammuz after his six months in the underworld (Ezekiel 8:14).

The second notable god was **Marduk** referred to also as **Bel** (Jer. 51:44). Marduk was the savior/hero god. According to Babylonian myth he had rescued the gods from the destructive power of their vengeful mother, the sea serpent Tiamat. The younger gods having killed their father Apsu now lived in fear of her. In a climactic battle Marduk defeated her. He then cut up her body and out of that created the world. Marduk then built a giant tower that went all the way to heaven. At the end of the epic poem, "War of the Gods" there is a fifty stanza (!) hymn to Marduk. This story has been a basic blueprint for everything from the Greek myths to Beowulf to Star Wars,

There were many others but these were the two principal deities of the Babylonians. It was in their treasury that the vessels of the house of God were placed (1:2).

II. Daniel's Master Strategy – 1:3-20

Daniel and his three friends (note the correct Hebrew names, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah) were presumably from the nobility of Israel, the upper classes. The king wanted them in his service (including the service of his gods). The king assigned them "a daily portion of the royal rations" and a three year education which would certainly have included the multiple accounts of Ishtar and Marduk, among others.

Daniel and his friends could simply have refused all this and taken the consequences which surely would have been death. Daniel could have invoked the "purity codes" of the Law of Moses which prohibited the eating of certain foods and even the wearing of certain clothes (Deut. 22:11). These of course will be set aside later by Jesus who touched lepers, ate with sinners and declared all foods to be clean (Mark 7:19). Daniel's strategy is not to defy, but to suggest and to interpret. Instead of eating the royal rations he proposes a test. He suggests that he and his friends eat only vegetables and water and that after ten days the palace master could compare their condition to those eating the king's "royal rations." Not surprisingly, Daniel and his friends were "better and fatter" than the others. More however is probably involved here than food. Royal dining in the ancient world often included immoral practices and entertainments (Mark 6:21-22). By making this suggestion Daniel has accomplished two things. First, he has shown respect for the court but has nonetheless presented a viable alternative. Second, he has avoided the temptation of the excess that could accompany the eating of "royal rations."

Daniel and his friends are then educated for three years in "every aspect of literature and wisdom" of the Babylonians. Again, Daniel could have simply refused this "education" of pagan idols and magic. Yet he and his friends take a far more effective and insightful approach. They master the material they are given to the point where they are "ten times better than all the magicians and enchanters" in the kingdom. The danger lies in partial knowledge. By thoroughly investigating the Babylonian culture they unmask both its illusions and its appeal. They don't deny the myths of Marduk. Rather they interpret them as symbols of the one true God (Ps. 74:12-17; Isa. 27:1). Are they the ones who reinterpret the story of the tower of Babel/Babylon (Gen. 11:1-9)? Is there a danger of being seduced by "this present world" (II Tim. 4:9)? Of course there is. We have to

assume that Daniel and his friends are thoroughly grounded in the Word of God. Like Paul, they know the beliefs of their culture (Acts 17:28). Therefore their witness is all the more compelling.

The debate of how to relate to the beliefs of the non-Christian world has gone on throughout church history. There have always been those like the early church father Tertullian who asked, "What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?" Certainly there have been times when the church, like ancient Israel, simply follows the pattern of the world. Yet the alternative of an escape into a sacred community, walled off from the world, is hardly consistent with the Lord who called us to go and disciple all nations. Daniel is a great example.

Questions for Us –

1. Why does God sometimes allow his people to be defeated by the forces of the world?
2. What lessons does Daniel give us for interacting with our world?
3. Why do Christians often try to avoid and, in effect, hide from the world? What does this say about our mission?

Next Study – "Prudence and Discretion" – Daniel chapter 2

Chapter 2 – “Prudence and Discretion”

Daniel and his friends are now counted among the wise men of Babylon. This category includes magicians and astrologers. Daniel and his friends are functioning within this group, a group that Israel was forbidden to have anything to do with in the Torah. Yet Daniel and his friends function as spies in the camp. God reveals the content of Nebuchadnezzar’s dream to Daniel, a dream which foretells the outline of history.

I. Can You Interpret the Dream? – 2:1-24

Nebuchadnezzar has a dream which disturbs him. He calls on all the “wise men.” These include magicians, enchanters and sorcerers. The king wants to know the meaning of his dream but he is not prepared to be naïve with his large retinue of wise men who also live comfortably in his court. He doesn’t just want them to tell what the dream means. He wants them to describe the dream itself. It is only if they can describe the dream initially that he will have any confidence in their interpretation.

The wise men protest. The king is asking too much. They claim no magicians or fortune tellers ever had to both describe someone else’s dream and then interpret it. The king however has a healthy skepticism about these “wise men.” Do they really know the dark secrets or is this just an act? The inference in Daniel is that the magicians have lost the vaunted powers they had earlier.

In the time of the Exodus the magicians of Egypt could perform some of the same miracles as Moses and Aaron. They could turn a staff into a snake (Ex. 7:8-13). They could also turn the Nile into blood and bring up frogs just as Moses and Aaron did (Ex. 7:22; 8:7). However by the time of the third plague their powers had run out. They tell Pharaoh that they are now witnessing the “finger of God” (Ex. 8:19). This is the same phrase Jesus uses later to describe his power over the demonic (Luke 11:20).

Both Moses and the later prophets had denounced the practice of magic (Lev. 19:31; Deut. 18:9-14; Isa. 8:19-20). What power they saw in magic came from demonic forces. Magic then for them was a type of witchcraft.

Yet as we saw previously Daniel and his friends had become experts in the “wisdom” of Babylon. They knew all about magic. However their knowledge unmasked the power of that wisdom. This again is a model for us. We hardly want to immerse ourselves in magic or witchcraft but the point at issue is if we seek to understand such things in the light of God’s Word, we remove their power.

In any event, the wise men of Babylon here are powerless. Convinced that they all are frauds the king orders their execution. This includes Daniel and his three friends. Daniel knows enough of the magic of Babylon to realize that it has no substance except what it might receive from a demonic power. With the aid of his friends he turns to prayer. In his prayer Daniel acknowledges

God's control over all things. God will reveal to him both the content of the king's dream and its interpretation.

II. The Meaning of the Dream (2:25-49)

Daniel describes both the dream and its meaning. The king had dreamed of a great statue with a head of gold, a chest and arms of silver, a middle and thighs of bronze and legs of iron. The feet were a mixture of iron and clay. As the king gazed at the statue it was shattered into dust by a large stone. There has been much discussion on the symbolism of this dream. Daniel states that the four sections of the statue are four kingdoms each one inferior to the preceding one. The simplest explanation is that these are four kingdoms established in Babylon. The first is the present one ruled over by Nebuchadnezzar. The second will be that of Nebuchadnezzar's son, Belshazzar. The third will be that of Darius the Mede (Dan. 5:30-31) who will conquer and destroy Belshazzar. Darius in turn will be overthrown by Cyrus of Persia (Dan. 6:28).

This then is a description of Babylon during the time of Israel's seventy year exile (Jer. 25:11-12). The critical point in the king's dream however is the large stone which destroys all the kingdoms. Several points can be made about this stone. In an initial sense the stone represents the power of God. The stone does not arise from within the kingdoms. It comes completely from outside them. Daniel makes clear that God alone rules over all (2:37-38). These various kings make their own choices. Yet God in his freedom intervenes to accomplish his will (Gen. 50:20; Ex. 3:19; 4:31). God allows humans their freedom but that freedom is not absolute (I Sam. 8:19-22). It is very noteworthy that God in the Book of Isaiah states that he has directly raised up Cyrus of Persia to allow the people of Israel to return to their land. God calls Cyrus his servant even while stating that Cyrus does not know him (Isa. 45:1-7)!

Two points seem to emerge here. On one side it is being made abundantly clear that God alone determines the outcome of history while at the same time allowing mortals to make their own plans and decisions. Nebuchadnezzar comes to this realization (2:47). God however has the final say. Cyrus will have no idea that he is fulfilling God's word to Jeremiah. As far as he knows he is acting out his own decisions in his own historical moment.

The consolation and hope of this chapter is that God really is in charge of history. When we look at historical events in the context of human life we see chaos, confusion and tragedy. These things are the result of human sin. Yet God has not abandoned history. He is engaging it and in fact is ultimately working all things after the counsel of his own will (Eph. 1:11).

More has to be said about this large stone. It represents more than just the power of God in a generic sense. This stone will become a great mountain and fill the whole earth (2:35). God is setting up a kingdom that will never be destroyed. It is appearing here in the days of Daniel. It will stand forever. What is being described here prophetically is the kingdom of Jesus Christ (Matt. 21:42-44 (Ps. 118:22); I Peter 2:4-8; Eph. 1:7-10; Rev. 1:8). Jesus himself will refer to the prophecies of Daniel (Matt. 24:15).

The four kingdoms represent the pattern of history. One kingdom rises up to replace an earlier one. Yet the controlling hand ultimately belongs to God. All of this is preparing for the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ which will never pass away (Rev. 1:4-6).

Questions for Discussion –

1. Why do you think magic has an appeal even to this day? Why is magic sometimes mixed with faith (see editorial on the “Prosperity Gospel” in *The New York Times* Feb. 14, 2016)?
2. Why is it so important for us to understand that God has the final word in history?
3. What does it mean for us in effect to have “dual citizenship,” belonging both to this present world and to the coming kingdom (rule) of Jesus Christ?

Chapter 3 – “The Fiery Furnace”

This famous story has much to teach us. We are called frequently to bow before the power and wealth of the world. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego are in the vulnerable position of being officials of the court. How far can they go in serving the king, the state and indeed the culture of Babylon? They cannot and will not bow before his statue (idol). They believe God can deliver them but even if he doesn't they won't bow to the king's command (Acts 5:29).

I. The Decree of the King – 3:1-15

At the end of chapter two we saw that Nebuchadnezzar acknowledged that Daniel's God was “God of gods and Lord of kings” (2:47). The reason for his praise seems principally to be that Daniel, in dependence on the Lord, was able to reveal and interpret the king's dream. It is clear, however, at the start of this chapter that Nebuchadnezzar is not fully aware of the reality of the true God, the God of Daniel and his friends, the God of Israel. This is not surprising since in Nebuchadnezzar's view the fact that he was able to defeat the Israelites and take them captive showed that the gods of Babylon were superior to any other god, including the God of Israel.

As was the case with many kings in this period, Nebuchadnezzar may well have believed that he himself was divine. At the least he was the appointed ruler of Marduk or Bel the greatest god in the world according to his belief. He therefore commissions a giant golden statue. The statue may have been of himself or even of the god Marduk. In any event the statue was to express the great power and majesty of Babylon. Babylon at this stage was an international force. The empire embraced a variety of nations and languages. The worship of the golden statue was intended, among other things, to unite all the conquered people under the unique authority of Babylon.

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego had special roles in the empire at this point. They oversaw all the affairs of Babylon (2:49). Therefore their refusal to comply with the king's command was an extremely serious affront. Initially, it does not appear that the king knows of their refusal to bow down before the statue when the command is given through “the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, drum and entire musical ensemble” (3:7). The king is informed of this fact by the Chaldeans, that is, some of the same magicians who no doubt resented the ascendancy of these three Jewish young men. When the king hears of their refusal he goes into a rage. He demands that they bow before the statue when the musical cue is given. Failure to do so will result in their being thrown into a “furnace of blazing fire” (3:15). Nebuchadnezzar then asks what he thinks is a rhetorical question, “who is the god that will deliver you out of my hands” (3:15).

As we will see, he is about to find out.

II. Four Men Unbound – 3:16-30

Nebuchadnezzar can only see the resistance of these three young leaders in his kingdom as an act of political as well as religious defiance. Their failure to worship the king's image is seen as a mark of disloyalty and therefore a potential threat to the kingdom. This is similar to what early Christians faced when they were commanded to say that "Caesar is Lord" on pain of death. Yet, the issue in all these cases is clear. God alone demands our ultimate allegiance (Acts 5:29). The critical point the three make is that God certainly is able to deliver them from the furnace, but even if he doesn't they will not bow before the king's image. God does not always rescue his servants. A clear example is Stephen the first martyr (Acts 7:50-54). Yet, Stephen remained faithful just as Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego do.

Furious at their defiance, the king orders the fire to be heated up seven times. The fire is so hot that those who throw the three in are themselves consumed. Yet, the king is astonished to see that there are four men in the furnace. He describes the fourth as "a son of the gods." Whether this figure is an angel or even Christ we do not know. It is sufficient to realize that this is the presence of God. There is an important lesson here. God does not deliver them *from* the furnace. He delivers them *in* the furnace. This may be our experience also. God doesn't necessarily deliver us out of suffering and trial. He rescues us in the midst of it. Another aspect of this is that God doesn't deliver Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego from the terror of their fate. God could have sent avenging angels to snatch them out of the king's presence (as angels could have delivered Christ from the cross). God could have destroyed the fiery furnace itself. He does neither of these. We cannot read this account too quickly. What was it like for the three young men to experience the reality of their imminent fate. They were tied up and taken to the opening of the blazing fire. They had to see it and feel its initial heat. It would appear to them that their doom was sealed. They were going to die a horrible death. They had to have also known that they could have cried out for mercy to the king at the last minute and promise to bow before his idol to save themselves. In other words, this is a great test of their faith. We shouldn't be surprised when God tests our faith (James 1:2-4).

God delivers the three young leaders. They come out of the fire untouched. There is not even a smell of the flames about them. The fourth figure has departed. Nebuchadnezzar now realizes that the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego is the true God. Nebuchadnezzar clearly sees the level of their commitment. He says, "They disobeyed the king's command and yielded up their bodies rather than serve and worship any god except their own God" (3:28). The king then issues a decree that no one can utter any blasphemy against the God of the three young men. Beyond this, he promotes them to an even higher standing in the kingdom.

To learn the lessons of this story we must remember that in the final moment of trial, the three young men had no assurance of deliverance or survival in any form. The king saw this and we need to see it too. Whether or not God chooses to deliver us in times of trial and temptation we have to be prepared to say with them that we will not bow down before

the golden idols of the world, whether they be idols of power, prestige or pleasure. God alone is the Lord and we serve only him as Jesus says to Satan in the moment of temptation (Matt. 4:10).

Questions for Discussion -

1. What are examples of golden idols in our time?
2. Why do you think God allows the three men to experience the full terror of their situation before delivering them?
3. What can we learn from the example of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego?

Chapter 4 – “The Conversion of Nebuchadnezzar”

This chapter is a major statement on the nature of human authority. Nebuchadnezzar was the greatest ruler of his era. He saw himself as a god-like figure, a descendent in some sense of the Babylonian god Marduk. However, Nebuchadnezzar has a very disturbing dream. Only Daniel can interpret it. The meaning of the dream is that Nebuchadnezzar will have to learn painfully of the limits of human authority. Yet, in so doing, he will be converted to the worship of the one true God.

I. Nebuchadnezzar’s Next Dream – 4:1-27

Nebuchadnezzar dreams a very disturbing vision. He calls in all the magicians and enchanters of Babylon. Perhaps because the dream had frightened him so he tells it to the magicians and then asks them to interpret it for him. However, none of them can interpret the king’s dream. Once again the king turns to Daniel. It is at this point that we learn of the contents of the dream. The dream is of a great tree at the center of the earth that reached up to heaven itself. This then is no ordinary tree. In fact, the myth of a giant tree representing the world would not have been unknown (the magicians should have been able to figure this one out). Scripture itself refers to trees as symbols of world rule and domination (Judges 9:8-15; Ezekiel 31). The tree in Nebuchadnezzar’s dream is visible to the whole world. Its foliage is beautiful and it provides food for all. It is important to recognize initially that the tree is not a negative image. Why then is Nebuchadnezzar’s dream so frightful?

It is not the image of the tree that is disturbing. It is what happens to the tree that bothers the king. First, we have a reference to a “holy watcher” who comes down from heaven. This figure pronounces a judgment on the tree. The tree is to be cut down. Only its stump will be left. The watcher then leaves the imagery of the tree and begins talking of a human person whose mind will be given over to that of an animal. Seven times (probably a period of completion given the symbolism of the number seven) will pass over this figure. The watcher states that this is a sentence “rendered by decree of the watchers” (4:17). There is also a reference to “holy ones.” The purpose of all this is that all who live, not just the individual being described, will know that “the Most High is sovereign over the kingdom of mortals” (4:17).

Nebuchadnezzar then turns to Daniel for the interpretation. Daniel’s reaction is noteworthy. He clearly understands the dream, but finds it disturbing and terrifying (he says “My Lord may this dream be for those who hate you and are your enemies!”). Daniel then gives the interpretation which God had given him. The tree is Nebuchadnezzar himself. More than that, the tree symbolizes the vast empire of Babylon, an empire that truly was not just political but economic and cultural as well. Yet, God will pour out a devastating judgment on Nebuchadnezzar. He will be driven away from human society and will live like a beast among the animals. Yet, this will not be permanent. It will last until Nebuchadnezzar is prepared to acknowledge the true God. The stump that remains will be the basis of a revived tree, symbolizing a re-established kingdom.

Daniel confronts the king with the fact that this is not inevitable. There is still time for the king to change his ways without falling essentially into a form of madness. The king needs to turn from his self-centered tyrannical rule in which he saw himself like God (Isa. 14:1-14). He needs to practice righteousness and mercy for the oppressed. The king however, like the rich young ruler, has amassed too much to give it up (Matt. 19:16-22).

II. The Dream Fulfilled – 4:28-37

It is obvious that the king does not take Daniel's advice. A whole year goes by. Nebuchadnezzar presumably has forgotten all about the dream. He is walking on the roof of his palace admiring the greatness of his city and the empire it represents. He takes all the credit: "Is not this magnificent Babylon which I have built" (4:30). The words are scarcely out of his mouth when the prophecy conveyed in the dream comes true. It sounds like he has gone insane. He is driven away from human society. He lives and eats like an animal. His hair and nails grow to the point where he looks more like a beast than a human being.

However, just as suddenly as the judgment came upon him, it ends. Nebuchadnezzar essentially is converted at least to a vision of the one true God. He has been stripped of all his previous illusions of power. He realizes that the God that Daniel worships is not some personal Hebrew deity. Rather he is the sovereign God, creator of heaven and earth. He is not only the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. He is the God of all.

The story of Nebuchadnezzar is a graphic account of the fact that all earthly rulers stand under the authority of God. They serve under his sole authority (Rom. 13:1). Whether it is Pharaoh who enslaves the Israelites or Cyrus who frees them, they are in God's hands whether they personally realize it or not (Rom. 9:17; Isaiah 45:1-4). God can strike them down at any moment (Acts 12:20-23). Jesus puts the issue most succinctly when, after Pilate claims he has the authority to release Jesus or to crucify him, Jesus responds by saying, "You would have no authority over me unless it had been given you from above" (John 19:11).

Contrary to what some people think, the Bible is an intensely political book. Given the scope of God's activity, where he works all things after the counsel of his will, it could hardly be otherwise (Eph. 1:11). One striking example of this is the reference to the "holy watchers" (Daniel 4:13, 23). We don't exactly know who these are and what their precise function is. They may be similar to the "sons of God" mentioned elsewhere. The suggestion is that these are guardians of God's order who oversee events on the earth. God holds them accountable for maintaining justice (Ps. 82:1-6).

The immediate question we want to raise is, why is there so much injustice and corruption in the earth? We might as well ask why is there so much sin? God has given basic freedoms to human beings made in his image. Yet every ruler is accountable to God sooner or later just as every individual is accountable. The psalmist asks the question, "Why do the nations conspire, and the peoples plot in vain?" (Ps. 2:1). The answer comes later in the psalm, "You shall break them with a rod of iron, and dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel" (Ps. 2:9).

Paul reminds us that we are to obey the commands of rulers for "what is good" (Rom. 13:1-4). On the other hand, we are not to fear authorities and rulers when they are abusive (Rev. 13). Whether rulers know it or not, God alone sets their boundaries and limits (Acts 17:26). God alone is the Lord of history. He is the one who declares the end from the beginning (Isa. 46:10).

In our next lesson we will see that Nebuchadnezzar's son did not learn his father's lesson.

Stay tuned.

Questions for Discussion –

1. Why do you think Daniel is concerned about the fate of Nebuchadnezzar?
2. Why does Nebuchadnezzar not take to heart Daniel's warning?
3. What lessons of history do we learn from God's judgment of Nebuchadnezzar?

Chapter 5 – “Belshazzar’s Big Party”

The fifth chapter of the Book of Daniel deals with a fearful judgment. Belshazzar, the son (or perhaps grandson) of Nebuchadnezzar, makes a great feast with a thousand guests. Under the influence of excessive drinking, he madly calls for the gold and silver vessels which had been taken from the temple in Jerusalem. A celebration of the power and greatness of Babylon turns into an actual nightmare when the finger of God writes on the wall. Only Daniel can interpret its meaning. The days of Belshazzar have come to an end. Like the fool in Luke 12:13-21 “this very night” Belshazzar’s life will be demanded. This story points up the important Biblical lesson that the weakness of God is stronger than the power of humans (1 Cor. 1:25). We need to learn this lesson over and over.

I. The Finger on the Wall – 5:1-9

King Belshazzar is presented here as a picture of complete indulgence. He is surrounded by wealth, power and privilege. His great feast is attended by a thousand people including his wives and concubines. Under the influence of his drinking, he decides to order that the gold and silver vessels which had been taken from the temple in Jerusalem should be brought out and used by his lords, wives and concubines (5:2). What is the point of all this? It may be as mundane as Belshazzar wanting to try something new, seeking a diversion. Belshazzar’s action implies several assumptions, all of which are deadly.

His first assumption would appear to be that the temple vessels have no inherent importance or significance. Babylon was an empire that had conquered numerous other nations. In every case anything of value was taken to Babylon as nothing more than property. A more serious assumption is that the God of Israel has no place in Babylon. The fact that Jerusalem was conquered would mean to him that whatever God there was in Israel was inferior to the great gods of Babylon. As we have seen Nebuchadnezzar made the same serious mistake.

As soon as they begin drinking from the Jerusalem vessels “the fingers of a human hand” appear writing on the wall of the royal palace. Belshazzar’s mood immediately changes. He becomes terrified and “his knees knocked together” (5:6). In a panic he calls for the magicians and wise men of Babylon to read the message and interpret it. Not surprisingly, none of them can do it.

There are two key Biblical themes here. The first is the finger of God. Even though the fingers appear to that a human hand, we soon learn that we are dealing with a divine presence. The first mention to the “finger of God” in scripture refers to God sending the plagues on Egypt. The magicians of Egypt could copy the first two plagues, but by the time of the third plague their power had ended. They cry out to Pharaoh, “This is the finger of God!” (Ex. 8:16-19). The Ten Commandments are written with the finger of God (Ex. 31:18). Jesus casts out demons by the finger of God (Luke 11:20). These references all

imply divine power. It is important to note that Belshazzar seems to understand this. He does not regard the writing on the wall as only some unknown strange experience. He seems to understand on some level its significance. That's why he is so terrified. The second theme is the often sinister nature of royal banquets. It is at a royal banquet that Joseph's prophecy that the king's baker will be hanged comes true (Gen. 39:20-23). It is at a royal banquet that the King of Persia does away with his wife for her failure to obey his commands, setting up the situation in which Esther is forced to become his queen (Esther 1:1-22). Again at a royal banquet Herod orders that John the Baptist be beheaded (Mark 6:14-29).

It needs to be made clear that there is nothing inherently wrong with a banquet, with eating, drinking and celebrating. The Jesus who turned water into wine and was accused of being "a glutton and a drunkard" certainly was not adverse to celebrations and banquets per se (John 2:1-11; Matt. 11:19). The issue in these various banquets, including Belshazzar's feast, is twofold. In one case these events become an occasion for a misuse of power. Herod is a clear example. In the other as we see here with Belshazzar it is idolatry. The stage is set for these violations by excesses of drink or sensual pleasure (Prov. 23:29-35; Mark 6:22).

II. Daniel Interprets the Vision – 5:10-31

In response to Belshazzar's distress, the queen mother tells him about Daniel who has "an excellent spirit, knowledge and understanding to interpret dreams, explain riddles and solve problems" (5:12). Belshazzar then sends for Daniel. The irony here is that initially he had sent for the temple vessels from Judah. Now he sends for one of the exiles of Judah (5:13).

Belshazzar offers Daniel all sorts of awards for interpreting the writing. Daniel is not interested and declines the offer. However before interpreting the writing on the wall, Daniel makes a prophetic statement about Belshazzar. He reminds him of his father Nebuchadnezzar who gave in to pride (5:20; Isa. 14:3-21). As a result, God judged him until "he learned that the Most High God has sovereignty over the kingdom of mortals" (5:21). However even though Belshazzar knew this he went ahead and in effect challenged God by desecrating the temple vessels. Belshazzar worshiped his idols and ignored the true God. It is only at this point that Daniel interprets the writing on the wall. The message is, as follows,

1. MENE, MENE – God is bringing the empire of Babylon to an end.
2. TEKEL – Belshazzar has been weighed in the balance and "found wanting" (5:27)
3. PERES – the kingdom is divided and will be given over to the Medes and the Persians

This then is not only a judgment on Belshazzar. It is God's judgment on the whole Babylonian Empire. The Babylonians made the fatal mistake of thinking that not only had they captured Judah, they had also defeated Judah's God. This was far from the case. Even though Israel was God's chosen people they were not immune to judgment. The

exile was God's response to their increasingly serious sins, the chief of which was idolatry. The Babylonians had not overthrown Israel. It is God and God alone who sent Israel into captivity for seventy years.

Belshazzar has mocked the true God. He did not learn from the example of his father. Therefore, he is given no hope. He dies that very night. Does this mean that Israel's exile is over? Not yet. Israel itself has to learn that God alone is sovereign. To him the nations are like a drop from a bucket (Isa. 40:15). Our very breath is in the hands of God (5:23). We can never forget that.

Questions for Discussion –

1. What does the example of Belshazzar say about the assumptions of pride, power and privilege that we see in our world?
2. Why do you think Belshazzar did not learn from the example of his father?
3. What confidence and hope do we take from Daniel's statement (in an election year) that "the Most High God has sovereignty over the kingdom of mortals, and sets over it whomever he will" (Dan. 5:21)?

Chapter 6 – “The Mouths of the Lions”

The most familiar passage in the Book of Daniel is the story of Daniel in the Lions’ Den. There are several key themes to this story. First is the idolatrous nature of the state represented by the king who demands to be prayed to exclusively for thirty days. Second is both the integrity and the vulnerability of Daniel. Third is the sovereignty of God who alone secures life or death. Finally, there is the image of Daniel as a type of Christ.

I. The Idolatrous Command – 6:1-15

Darius the Mede is now the ruler of Babylon. He is impressed with Daniel who distinguishes himself from all the other officers of the king. The king in fact is so impressed with him that he plans to put him in charge of the whole kingdom. Daniel is described as having “an excellent spirit” (6:3). Daniel, like Joseph before him, is flourishing in an idolatrous and pagan environment. Daniel’s honesty and obvious strong work ethic are what recommend him. Yet because of the context in which he finds himself he remains vulnerable.

The first point of this vulnerability is the jealousy of the other administrators, “the presidents and satraps.” They resent Daniel’s success and they are not about to be placed under the authority of this Hebrew exile. However, Daniel’s integrity is such that they can find no basis to accuse him. They then come up with an idea that will appeal to the king’s vanity. They ask that the king sign an edict which states that no one in the kingdom can pray to anyone, human or divine, except the king for thirty days. The king plays into the trap and signs the edict. Under the law of the Medes and the Persians no law can ever be revoked.

Is this a crazy system or what? Does the king intend to answer these prayers over a thirty-day period? How could he do that (One thinks of the scene in the movie, *Bruce Almighty* in which Bruce, playing God, is being overwhelmed with all the prayers from the people in Buffalo). If the king doesn’t intend to answer these prayers, then what’s the point of his edict? Also, what kind of political system is set up so that laws can never be revoked or changed? What we’re really seeing here is the flawed nature of an idolatrous system. Any human entity which seeks to claim people’s complete commitment is finally doomed to failure. We may not have leaders who deify themselves but we see businesses, schools and even churches which seek to control people’s lives. Whatever entity tries to do this is doomed to failure. There is always the “thirty-day” (or whatever period) project during which time people are being asked totally to sacrifice themselves for a business proposal, final exams, a championship series or whatever. Invariably these systems become idolatrous because too often they allow no room for the living God.

Daniel will not be intimidated. Still less will he compromise. He continues to pray to God as he has always done. He prays three times a day with his windows open facing Jerusalem. Daniel could easily have prayed in secret, but he refused to compromise his faith even a little bit. For all the service Daniel has rendered to Babylon he is still fully committed to his God. However, living out his faith so publicly makes him all the more vulnerable to his enemies. The same applies to us as well. Daniel is an example of a

believer functioning well in a pagan world. However, he will not be conformed to that world (Rom. 12:2).

Daniel's enemies can't wait to tell the king that Daniel has violated the royal edict. Upon hearing this the king "was very much distressed" (6:14). The king desperately wants to rescue Daniel but he is trapped by his own ego. The edict he signed cannot be altered or changed. Darius has fallen into his own trap. Darius is a classic example of someone who desires something which, upon gaining it, comes back to haunt him with terrible and unforeseen consequences. Darius signed the edict giving himself divine authority. Yet that authority now is about to deprive him of his most trusted officer. Darius is like the Greek king Midas who, in love with wealth, wished that everything he touched would turn to gold. What Midas doesn't realize, once he has his wish, is that his food now always turns to gold. He can no longer eat or drink. In Nathaniel Hawthorne's version his beloved little daughter comes to hug and kiss him and then is turned into lifeless gold. Midas implores the gods to take away this gift which he now realizes is a curse. He trades away his gold and his "golden touch" to have his daughter restored and to once again be able to eat and drink (In the Disney cartoon version he gives all the gold away just to be able to eat a hamburger with onions!). However, no such possibility exists for Darius. He is the helpless prisoner of his own pride.

II. The Final Word – 6:16-28

The king has no choice. He has to sentence Daniel to the lions' den. He expresses the hope that the God to whom Daniel has prayed and whom he has served so faithfully will deliver him. Nothing is said of appealing to the gods of Babylon. Presumably Darius realizes that they have no power. Not only is Daniel placed in the den of lions but a stone is placed over the mouth of the den and the king seals it with his own signet (Is this sounding familiar?). There is no escape for Daniel.

The king passes a terrible night. He can't eat or sleep. At dawn he rushes to the den which now should be Daniel's tomb. He cries out to Daniel and calls him "servant of the living God." Tammuz, like the other gods of Babylon, is not coming out of his tomb. These gods are dead idols (Ezekiel 8:14-15). Daniel, however, is alive and well. God has sent his angel (with a flaming sword?) to shut the mouths of the lions (These lions are not like what we see in the zoo. They are large brutes who were starved and abused so that they would attack anything and anyone). Daniel has been vindicated. Daniel is not harmed because he trusted in God. However, we know that statement is not always true. There are those who trust in God who do not escape the threat of harm or death. Daniel's three friends already acknowledged this possibility (3:17-18). But, God does deliver in this case and Daniel is rescued from the jaws of death, literally (Pss. 22:13; 35:17; 58:6; 124:6).

The king knows he has been tricked. He gives a command that Daniel's accusers along with their whole families be thrown down into the lions' den. This time the mouths of the lions are not shut! The king gives a second command acknowledging that Daniel's God is the living God and he has sovereignty over all. In a prophetic statement, the king states that the kingdom of the living God will endure forever and never be destroyed. Whether this is a

statement of faith or just a realization we don't know. However, this testimony may well have had an impact on Darius' successor, Cyrus, who will return the Jews to Jerusalem.

There is clearly symbolism in this story. Daniel being placed in the lions' den has obvious parallels with Jesus being sealed in a tomb with a stone covering the entrance (Matt. 27:62-65). Darius' coming to the den at the break of day foreshadows the women coming to the tomb on the first day of the week. However, in Jesus' case, there is no rescue from death. The angels stand poised watching Jesus as he is arrested. Certainly their swords are drawn. They are prepared to save him from his enemies. Jesus, however, never calls on them (Matt. 27:53).

Why did Daniel have to go into the lions' den at all? We might as well ask why did Jesus have to go to the cross? Why do the righteous suffer? We can never fully answer these questions. Peter reminds us that we are all in the lions' den in our Christian lives. Satan roams around like a "roaring lion" looking for someone to devour (I Peter 5:8). Daniel remains a powerful example. We are called to be faithful and leave the rest up to God.

Questions for Discussion –

1. What can we learn from the example of Darius? How can we be trapped by our own desires?
2. What are example in our world today of systems like the 'law of the Medes and the Persians' that are both inflexible and all controlling?
3. Why do you think Daniel had to go into the lions' den? What are some of the lions' dens that we have to go into?

Chapter 7 – “One Like a Son of Man”

This chapter has been the subject of intense debate and analysis, not all of it, frankly, worthwhile. We have here an example of what is called “apocalyptic” literature. This means that the text unfolds or reveals some special truth invariably in symbolic form. These passages are not crossword puzzles or riddles to be solved, predicting some hidden truth about specific events in the future. Rather they are symbols intended to give us insight, direction and hope in a world that is often dark and uncertain.

I. The Beasts from the Sea – Daniel 7:1-8

This chapter opens with a description of a dream that Daniel had. Dreams in scripture are often the occasion of visions or some kind of special message. The vision Daniel has is a very bizarre one to put it mildly. He sees the four winds stirring up “the great sea.” Out of the sea emerge four beasts, more monsters than animals. The fourth beast is especially terrifying. It has ten horns and then another little horn appears.

What are we to make of all this? The sea is often presented as a place of darkness and chaos (Genesis 1:2). A number of commentators have seen these beasts as symbolic descriptions of the situation in Daniel’s world. It has been pointed out that the four beasts represent four world empires all of which emerge during Israel’s seventy years of captivity in Babylon. By that reckoning the respective kingdoms symbolized would be Babylon, Media, Persia and Greece. This interpretation will be found later in Daniel explicitly (Daniel 8:15-25). These same kind of symbols will be used later in the Book of Revelation to describe the Roman Empire (Revelation 13).

Yet, if this is the case why such bizarre symbols? Why not simply identify the empires in the order in which they will appear? Some have seen this passage as drawing on symbols of the Babylonian Creation myth. Yet, outside of such basic symbols as the great sea I do not find this convincing. How then are we to read these “apocalyptic” passages such as those we find in Daniel and in other books of the Bible like Ezekiel and Revelation not to mention Jesus’ use of such terminology in the gospels (Matthew 24; Mark 13; Luke 21)?

The value of symbols is that they do not have a single referent. The symbol of a bird can signify in varying ways flight, freedom, vulnerability, life and even idols (Rom. 1:22-23). The psalmist can refer to birds as symbols of escape (Psalm 11:1; Psalm 124:7), loneliness (Psalm 102:7), and God’s care (Psalm 104:16-17; Matthew 10:29). These are all very different images but each one of them is symbolized by something as basic as birds.

Throughout history, people have seen in these images of terrifying beasts descriptions of everything from the Roman Empire to Nazi Germany to Isis. Yet, properly understood, this isn’t wrong provided we don’t make too literal a connection between the symbol and the historical figure or nation they are supposed to represent. It may well be that these beasts refer to the empires of Daniel’s time. Yet as symbols they refer to much more than that. They are pictures of world history in which empires devour each other, often one more

terrible than the next. Vergil in his great work, *The Aeneid*, claimed that the Roman Empire would restore a lost golden age of peace and prosperity. The real history of the Roman Emperors is quite different as the Roman historian Tacitus describes it:

“I am entering on the history of a period rich in disasters, frightful in its wars, torn by civil strife and even in peace, full of horrors” (Tacitus *The History* 1.2).

Whose description of the unfolding drama of history is more accurate, Daniel's or Vergil's?

II. The Hope of the World – Daniel 7:9-28

Daniel next records a heavenly vision. He describes an “Ancient One” who took his throne. To all appearances this is a picture of God on his throne. As Daniel watches the great beast is put to death. Is this terrifying beast Babylon, Greece, Rome, Nazi Germany or the Soviet Union? All of the above and more. These idolatrous empires all face destruction. The other beasts lose their dominion but “their lives were prolonged for a season and time.” In other words, the destruction of the world empire does not lead to a golden age of peace. Conflict and destruction continue.

Then Daniel sees, literally, “one like a son of man coming with the clouds of heaven.” To this one is given “dominion and glory and kingship.” His dominion is an everlasting dominion. All peoples, nations and language will serve him. This figure may appear as a human being, but he is certainly much more than human. This figure has echoes of the ancient heroes and gods that the Babylonians would have known and worshipped. The title is used of Jesus in the same sense that we have it here in Daniel. He will come on the clouds of heaven to rule the world (Matthew 24:29-31). He will judge “all who are in their graves” (John 5:25-29).

Daniel is terrified by all this, but the vision is clear enough in the sense that the powers of this world will not endure. They will fall before the Son of Man. His followers will rule forever and ever (Daniel 7:18). The final resistance to the reign of this Son of Man will be “a fourth kingdom.” This is the figure of a demonic empire whether it is the self-appointed divine rulers of Rome or later tyrants and deified political systems. These figures will oppose the reign of the true God. They may be Nebuchadnezzar, the corrupt kings (and queens) of Israel, the Roman Emperor or whomever. There is probably a reference here to the Selucid King Antiochus Epiphanes IV who introduced pagan sacrifice into the temple in Jerusalem and even slaughtered a pig on the altar. Yet, in the nature of symbolism, we cannot make a one for one reference. Symbols by their very nature are expansive. Will there be a final “fourth kingdom” in history that will rebel against the Son of Man and the Ancient of Days? Some think so. This is a picture we have in the Book of Revelation (Revelation 20:7-10).

All of this terrifies Daniel. Yet this is our great hope. The violence and evil we see in the world cannot prevail. Yes, it still exists. Yes, we still have the warning of “a fourth kingdom” which may even surpass the previous kingdoms. Yet, there is no question that the Son of Man will overcome it all. This is the figure we see also in Revelation (Revelation

1:12-16) who is also King of Kings and Lord of Lords. We have the promise of an everlasting kingdom (Daniel 7:22). Amen!

Questions for Us –

1. Why do you think the scriptures so often use symbols?
2. What lessons should we take from this chapter regarding our own moment of history?
3. How does this image of the “one like a son of man” encourage us in the conflicts we encounter in our present world?

Chapter 8 – “The Cunning King – Antichrist?”

This chapter in many respects is a parallel to the previous one. However here we are told what the animal symbols represent. This is a picture of events that did not take place in Daniel’s time but occurred later. We have here a more detailed description of the “little horn” mentioned in 7:8. Whereas in chapter 7 we had a dominant image of Christ, the “one like a son of man,” here we have a warning picture of the Antichrist. Again, these visions are pictures of world history. As disturbing as they might appear, they prepare us to live faithfully in the upheavals of our own time.

I. The Little Horn – 8:1-22

Daniel’s vision of the ram and the powerful goat are here defined as key historical figures. Daniel is writing in the “third year of the reign of King Belshazzar.” This then is two years after the vision recorded in chapter 7 (cf. 7:1). The date would be about 552 B.C.E. The events recorded will take place many years later. Daniel then is having a prophetic dream of the future. The reason for the symbolism of the ram and goat is that he is describing events and figures that he himself could not identify. Daniel finds these visions, like the previous ones, very disturbing. Yet Daniel is being called upon to play a major role in describing God’s actions in history. Jesus himself will quote Daniel (Matt. 24:15). Since we have some clear referents here as well as the testimony of the so-called apocryphal books, I and II Maccabees, we can fairly accurately narrate the period of history Daniel is describing.

The ram with the two horns (8:2-4) is the joint kingdoms of the Medes and the Persians. How do we know this? No mystery here, Daniel tells us (8:20). The Medes overthrow the Babylonians but themselves give way to the Persians who established the greatest empire the world had known up to that point. Cyrus the Great came to power in 550 B.C.E. and initially shared his empire with the Medes, hence the references to the law of the “Medes and the Persians” (6:12). Cyrus overthrew the Babylonians in 539 B.C.E. Even after the decline of the Medes Persia remained a major power. Cyrus is important in Biblical history as the king who allowed Israel to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the city and the temple. God makes it clear to Isaiah that he has raised up Cyrus for this purpose just as he had earlier raised up Pharaoh in Egypt (Isa. 45:1-4; Ex. 9:16). God is involved in history. The Persian Empire gives way to the Greeks. The “male goat” described here would be Alexander the Great who ruled and conquered from 336 -323 B.C.E. (8:21). His sudden death is referred to in v. 8. The “four prominent horns” who come after him are the generals that divided his empire into four parts (for the record they are Cassander, Lysimachus, Seleucus and Ptolemy).

Ptolemy conquered Israel and his family ruled it for over a hundred years. They were in turn overthrown by Antiochus the third who was a descendent of Seleucus and known therefore as a “Selucid king.” He in turn was overthrown by the Romans in 190 B.C.E. and was succeeded by his son Seleucus IV. He later was overthrown by his brother Antiochus Epiphanes IV. This is the little horn mentioned earlier in

7:8. Although he was not a major king he had a devastating impact on Israel. He is the prototype of the Antichrist.

In an attempt at either sheer domination or an effort to win favor from Rome Antiochus introduced pagan and idolatrous practices not only into Jerusalem but into the temple itself. The phrase, “the transgression that makes desolate” refers to all this which is recorded in the books of the Maccabees (I Macc. 1:10-15, 41-64; II Macc. 4:7-17; 6:1-6). These atrocities eventually led to the revolt initiated by Judas Maccabeus.

So what is the lesson for us here?

II. “A King of Bold Countenance” – 8:23-27

Antiochus Epiphanes IV is the first person in history to play the role of the Antichrist. As John says “there are many antichrists” (I John 2:18). Antiochus may be the first but he is certainly not the last. The angel Gabriel tells Daniel that this vision “refers to the appointed time of the end.” This will be a “period of wrath.” We have been living in this since the essential crisis of the ages occurred with the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ (the “last days,” Acts 2:14-21). Jesus destroyed the power of evil on the cross (Eph. 4:8-10). However, he has not yet removed it from history (Rev. 12:12). What is the shape and nature of evil? It is what is described here as the tactics of Antiochus Epiphanes which the antichrists will follow until the end when Paul speaks of a final “lawless one:”

“The coming of the lawless one is apparent in the working of Satan, who uses all power, signs, lying wonders, and every kind of wicked deception for those who are perishing because they refused to love the truth and so be saved.” (II Thessalonians 2:9).

How will this “lawless one” carry out his (her?) plans? Gabriel gives Daniel a description.

The king of bold countenance will

1. Be skilled in intrigue – v. 23
2. Cause fearful destruction – v. 24
3. Destroy the powerful “and the people of the holy ones” – v. 24
4. Will be cunning – v. 25; Gen. 3:1
5. Make deceit prosper – v. 25
6. Shall rise up even against the “Prince of princes”

As we have noted this profile could fit many of the tyrants throughout history from Caesar Augustus to Osama bin Laden. What is most significant about this figure is that he will be a master of deceit using cunning and intrigue. Scripture points to the image of a final figure who

appears at the end of the period of the empires mentioned “when the transgressions have reached their full measure.” Yet between now and then we will face “many antichrists.”

The assumption that this will be a male figure can certainly be challenged. Paul’s use of the term “man of sin” is the generic term for “human” (“anthropos” from which we get the word “anthropology”). Jezebel is as much an antichrist figure as anyone else and she is referred to in Revelation 2:20. The original idolatrous deity was a woman (the queen of heaven, Jer. 7:18). The priestesses of this cult corrupted Israel in the wilderness (Num. 25:1-5), turned Solomon away from the Lord (I Kings 11:1-8) and compromised the early Christians (I Cor. 6: 12-20). Nor would this figure have to be directly associated with sexuality as examples like the witch of Endor indicate (I Sam. 28:3-7).

What does this mean for us? Basically we need to recognize that we are in the “last days.” Christ’s victory on the cross is being opposed by the forces of evil. Evil is not dark and ugly. It is no Darth Vader. It uses intrigue and deception rather than force to achieve its ends. It masquerades as “an angel of light,” II Cor. 11:14-15. It seeks to seduce us by offering, in one way or another, the “splendor” of this world (Matt. 4:8). It rises up against the “Prince of princes,” Jesus Christ. We do not have the strength to unmask or defeat this “king of bold countenance.” However, we have the confidence and assurance that he (she) will be broken “and not by human hands.” Therefore, we have no reason to fear (Rev. 1:17).

Questions for Us –

1. Why is it so important for us to understand the deceptive practices of evil?
2. Why is Daniel so dismayed by this vision? What can we know that he doesn’t?
3. How can we maintain a spiritual balance between confidence in Christ and concern about the antichrists both present and future?

Chapters 9-10 – “Prayer and Power”

These two chapters present us with two essential parts of prayer, one of which we often use and the other, unfortunately, we tend to neglect. Daniel prays a prayer of confession. The continued disobedience of Israel is what led to their captivity in Babylon. Yet that will not last forever. It will end after seventy years solely because of God’s mercy, not because of any special righteousness on Israel’s part. The answer to Daniel’s prayer is delayed because of spiritual conflict between angels and demons. We must remember that in prayer we enter into this same spiritual conflict which will continue until Christ’s kingdom is established on earth.

I. “we have sinned against you” – 9:1-27

This is a model prayer. Daniel begins his narrative by stating that he was studying the prophet Jeremiah to determine how long Israel’s captivity would continue. The answer is seventy years (Jer. 25:11-12). Daniel begins his prayer with praise (v. 4). He then goes on to speak of Israel’s many sins. This includes acting wickedly, rebelling, turning from God’s commandments and not listening to the prophets. Daniel adds that righteousness is on God’s side but Israel is left only with “open shame” (v. 7).

There are three notable points about this confession. Daniel emphasizes that he is speaking of “all Israel” (v.11). There are no exceptions. This also means that he includes himself. Yet Daniel and his three friends, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, would hardly fit this description. Daniel here is dealing with something more than individual sin. Sin is a complex web. It embraces everything it touches. We often think that if we have not directly committed a sin then we are innocent. Yet that may not be the case. We don’t see ourselves as oppressors or unjust persons. Yet there may be many ways that we participate in oppression or injustice without thinking about it. If we buy anything from groceries to t-shirts which may be the result of unjust systems elsewhere in the world, we are participating in sin. If people on the other side of the world are deprived of water because of climate change and we do nothing to address the problem, we in effect are implicated.

This brings up a second point. Daniel offers no excuses for either for himself or for Israel as a whole. Often, instead of making a full confession of our sins, we offer excuses for our behavior. Daniel realizes that finally we have no excuse before God. Our best efforts are tainted with self-serving motives. This leads Daniel to his third point. The only hope for Israel (and for us) is the fact of God’s “mercy and forgiveness” (v. 9). That is the only way that any of us can stand. Daniel implores God for mercy. He pleads on behalf of the devastated city of Jerusalem which he reminds God is God’s own city (v. 16; Ps. 46:4-5). The basis for Daniel’s appeal is God’s great mercies not any righteousness on the part of Israel (v. 18). Daniel asks for these mercies for God’s own sake. God made a covenant with Israel going all the way back to Abraham (Gen. 15). Daniel implores God to act on God’s own righteousness, to fulfill his promise and restore Israel. This quite simply is an early statement of what Paul will later call justification by faith (Rom. 3:28).

While Daniel is praying the angel Gabriel appears to him in response to his prayer. The great message that Gabriel brings Daniel personally is that he is “greatly beloved” (v. 23). This is our assurance as well. God loves us not because we are deserving or worthy but

because God is gracious and merciful. The message that Gabriel gives is that Israel's full captivity, beyond even Babylon, will literally be seventy times seven years (490 years) or "seventy weeks." While these numbers are clearly symbolic (built around the number "seven" signifying perfection or completeness, Daniel is being given a vision of a distant future.

What he is seeing is the appearance of the Antichrist figure that we have already encountered in the Selucid general Antiochus Epiphanes who in the second century B.C. (or BCE) defiled the holy of holies in Jerusalem. The faithful high priest, Onias, "the anointed one," (v. 26) was murdered as a prelude to these events. Antiochus is referred to as "an abomination that desolates" (9:27). Jesus himself will refer to him as a prototype of the Antichrist (Matt. 24:15).

What Daniel is being told is that Jerusalem will be restored after the seventy years but this will not be the end of conflict. That will continue for the indeterminate seventy times seven years. This brings us to the second aspect of prayer in these chapters.

II. Prayer and the Battle – chapter 10

Daniel has had a variety of dreams and visions. We are preparing now for his final vision. This vision will give nothing less than an outline of history. It will focus on a "great conflict" (v. 1). Daniel has been in mourning for three weeks. He does not give a specific reason. It may relate to the fate of Israel now with Cyrus in power who will send Israel back to Jerusalem. If we take this literally as a seventy-year exile Daniel would be close to ninety.

Yet he actual dates ("third year of King Cyrus") add up to about 50 years. The "seventy" could then be symbolic, referring to a time of completion (7x10).

Daniel has been avoiding "rich food" (v. 2) for a period of three weeks. We will learn that he prayed for guidance three weeks earlier. Suddenly an angel appears. Those with Daniel do not see the angel but they sense that a major event has occurred and they run and hide. Daniel himself has no strength. Hearing the voice of the angel Daniel is overwhelmed and falls "into a trance, face to the ground" (v. 10). The angel touches him and raises him up. He is again called "greatly beloved" (v. 11). The angel has a special message for Daniel. Daniel however in his weakened state isn't ready for it. The angel touches him and strengthens him. He is told not to fear and to be "strong and courageous" (v. 19; Joshua 1:6-9; Isa. 41:10).

The angel then reveals something critical about the nature of prayer. He tells Daniel that from the moment Daniel prayed his words were heard. Gabriel was sent to respond to him but was delayed twenty-one days in conflict with "the prince of the kingdom of Persia! The arch angel Michael came to his aid so he could continue on to Daniel. The angel then tells Daniel that he has to return to the fight against the prince of Persia after which he must confront the angel of Greece. What is this all about?

We easily forget that we are in a spiritual conflict the whole time we are in this life. Paul emphasizes this in the familiar passage in Eph. 6:10-17. Whenever we pray we enter into this conflict. These "princes" of Persia or Greece refer to the gods of those nations which quite simply are instruments of Satan whose control of this world was uncontested before the coming of Christ (Matt. 4:8-9). Even after the victory of the cross the battle still

continues. We are used to praying for needs, for help in difficult times. We know the elements of praise and confession in prayer. Yet we can never forget that prayer brings us into the realm of spiritual conflict. Along with the other elements of prayer we need always to pray that we be delivered from evil (Matt. 6:13). This is a truth that we dare not neglect.

Questions for Discussion –

1. Why do we so often neglect the idea of corporate sin as Daniel expresses it? What is the problem with only seeing sin as individual acts rather than broad, inclusive patterns of action (“principalities and powers”)?

2. What can we learn from Daniel’s model of prayer in chapter 9?

3. Why is it important to emphasize that prayer brings us into spiritual conflict, a conflict in which even the angels fight on our behalf?

Chapters 11-12 – “The Time of the End-”

In these chapters we are presented with what will be the pattern of history from the time of Daniel to the end of the world. This pattern is repeated by Jesus in what has become known as the Olivet Discourse (Matt. 24, Mark 13, Luke 21). The history that will unfold will be an ongoing series of conflicts and wars, battles and intrigues until a final confrontation will take place. Daniel asks when will this all take place? He is given no clear answer but is told to persevere. We are called to do the same. Chapter 12:2 is the first mention in the Bible of the resurrection of the dead.

I. The Pattern of History – chapter 11

This chapter gives us a detailed picture of the rise of Antiochus Epiphanes whom we met earlier as “the abomination that desolates” (Dan. 9:27). He is the prototype of the Antichrist whom Jesus describes in Matt. 24:15. Basically, Antiochus arises out of the breakup of Alexander the Great’s empire following his death. The rise of Antiochus establishes a pattern which continues throughout history. The pattern which covers the rise and fall of nations and the catastrophes of war can be summarized as being composed of eight basic elements:

1. Pride – 11:3
2. Empires – 11:7
3. Betrayal – 11:21
4. Alliances – 11:21
5. Idolatry – 11:31
6. Resistance – 11:32
7. Persecution – 11:33-35
8. Judgment and Deliverance – 11:45

Jesus presents the same essential pattern in the Olivet Discourse (Matt. 24:3-31). Paul has an extensive discussion of the Antichrist in II Thess. 2:1-12. An obvious candidate for the antichrist in Paul’s time would have been Nero. He was certainly an example of the many Antichrists that were already present. Yet Paul has in mind a final figure which matches the basic pattern of Antiochus Epiphanes.

Paul first reminds his readers that the day of the Lord has not already come. No one knows the day or hour when it will come (Acts 1:7). The final figure of the Antichrist will exalt himself “above every so-called god or object of worship” (II Thess. 2:4). He will declare himself to be God. The Caesars, Nero included, claimed to be divine but none exalted themselves above Zeus or Apollo. Theirs was a system of multiple gods. The final Antichrist will, in effect if not directly, claim to be Christ. His system is already at work (“There are many Antichrists,” (I

John 2:18). This whole period since the Resurrection are the “last days.” However, these need to be distinguished from the “final days,” we may say. False messiahs and Christs will perform miracles (Matt. 24:24).

For Paul the final telling sign of the end will be the removal of “the one who now restrains” (II Thess. 2:7). Most commentators believe that this is the Holy Spirit who came into the world in a new way on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2). This is a sober teaching. We are to prepare ourselves for a final confrontation at the end of history when this “man of sin,” as Paul calls him, is finally revealed. We are not to lose hope. His appearing will signal the Second Coming of Christ with the result that he, Satan and all the antichrist figures will be destroyed (Rev. 19:11-20:10).

The final statement of 11:40-45 which refers to events “at the time of the end,” do not parallel the final details of the life of Antiochus Epiphanes. Rather they give us a glimpse of the future destiny of the final Antichrist who “shall come to his end, with no one to help him” (v. 45). In other words, do not be afraid.

II. “Happy Are Those Who Persevere” – chapter 12

One of the points of encouragement in all this is the presence of Michael, the archangel. We are in a spiritual conflict but we are not without resources. However, Michael gives a warning that is repeated by Jesus. History will end in a time of anguish “such as has never occurred since nations first came into existence” (v. 1). In Jesus’ words,

“For at that time there will be great suffering, such as has not been from the beginning of the world until now, no, and never will be” (Matt. 24:21).

Michael assures Daniel that his people will be delivered. Jesus says that for the sake of the elect those days will be cut short (Matt. 24:22). We then have an early reference to the resurrection of the dead, a key theme in the New Testament. There is an obscure statement in Hebrew which says that “knowledge will increase” (12:4). The Greek translation of the Old Testament however says “evil will increase.” Could “knowledge” be a reference back to the forbidden tree of knowledge in the Garden of Eden (Gen. 2:17)? Michael’s last statement is that “when the shattering of the power of the holy people comes to an end, all these things would be accomplished” (12:7). Daniel doesn’t understand. Neither do we. So what’s the point?

Unlike Daniel we have the perspective of history. The defining point is the three and a half years (1, 335 days) in which Antiochus Epiphanes defiled and oppressed Israel (164-168 B.C.). This is detailed in I Maccabees. This is the pattern of the end but it is not the end. It points forward to the destruction of the temple in 70 A. D. This was foretold by Jesus (Luke 21:20-24). The Nazi

holocaust is the most recent example. We have to realize that Israel is central to God's plans for history (Rom. 9-11).

Daniel's question about when and how all this will happen goes unanswered. There will be conflict and great suffering up until the final climax of history. The war will continue between good and evil, God and Satan, Christ and Antichrist. Our assurance is that "many shall be purified, cleansed and refined" (12:10). The gospel will go forth (Mark 13:10). Michael's final words to Daniel apply to us, "Happy are those who persevere." To persevere is to be faithful and watchful in a suffering and unjust world.

Questions for Us –

1. How seriously do we take this picture of history? How often do we just become comfortable and complacent?
2. What do you think Michael, the archangel, means by "persevere?" What would be some examples?
3. Given the centrality of Israel to God's plan of salvation how should we relate to our Jewish neighbors?