

# GOD'S MESSAGE TO MAN THROUGH THE PROPHETS

## III. THE PROPHETIC WORD AND THE NATIONS

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The second chapter in Daniel has well been called the alphabet of prophecy. He who would have any understanding of the prophetic Scriptures, must come to this portion for the broad outlines of God's future program for the nations, for Israel, and for the glorious kingdom of Messiah. The sketch presented in this chapter is simple but most comprehensive. It is the framework for a multitude of future events. Its importance cannot be over-estimated. Strangely enough, the picture of events is given in the form of a dream, and that to a pagan king. Nebuchadnezzar was in this hour the ruler of most of the civilized world and much of the barbarian world as well. Though he may not have exercised actual sway over all this area, yet God had given him right and title over all the nations. This sovereignty had been granted Nebuchadnezzar because God had displaced the rule of His people Israel in the earth. Such was the consequence of their many years of backsliding and departure from the revealed will of God. As we have seen, this was the beginning of the times of the Gentiles, spoken of by the Lord Jesus Christ in Luke 21:24.

At the time of the first invasion of Judah by Nebuchadnezzar he was not the emperor, but ruled as a subordinate with his father, Nabopolassar. When this chapter commences, he had been sole ruler for two years. The dream consisted of several parts, so it is referred to in the plural. The king, the most powerful ruler of the day, had doubtless given much thought to the course of his rule, and had probably wondered often what the outcome of his reign would be. Thoughtful men and women know they cannot remain on earth forever, so they are concerned about what the future holds. God's Word alone holds the key to the events of time and eternity. It is important to remark here that it was not to Daniel but to Nebuchadnezzar, the first representative of world power and rule outside of Israel, that God disclosed at the start of the times of the Gentiles, the final doom of the first kingdom and those which were to follow until the kingdom of the Lord was realized on earth. Because Nebuchadnezzar was a heathen, and did not have the Scriptures of the Jews, he was communicated with by God in dreams, as God had done with Abimelech (Genesis 20) and Pharaoh (Genesis 41). Unlike Pharaoh who remembered his dream, Nebuchadnezzar had forgotten his, probably from fright. The heathen attached much importance to dreams, but it was to be an Israelite who would ultimately give its interpretation.

Having forgotten the dream and concerned over its meaning, the king turned naturally to his learned men. He consulted his magicians, astrologers (those who made their incantations with mutterings and whisperings), the sorcerers and probably the priests who are designated as Chaldeans. The king was frank to admit that his dream had gone from him. Some have questioned that the king really forgot the dream; they think this was his method of testing his learned men. It appears more plausible that he had actually forgotten it through the strange nature of the dream. The dream was so solemn and foreboding, that on awakening he had only the recollection of something startling in the dream, but the details were blacked out of his memory. He was master of a vast realm, but he was also aware that to the north there was a growing and threatening power of the Medes. If he had a foreboding of disaster,

this could have formed the basis of the dream which God used to outline the future of Gentile rule on earth in the centuries that lay ahead.

At this point in the original text the language changes from the Hebrew to the Aramaic, and that appropriately. The content of the dream will concern the Gentile world, so the language is a Gentile one to be the medium of the disclosure. The language is Aramaic through chapter 7. When the prophecies touch the Jews and Jerusalem, the language is Hebrew. Charlatans and quacks that they were, the wise men asked for the dream to be given them to manipulate according to their cunning ways.

The king's answer was immediate, promising them swift and summary judgment for non-compliance with his urgent request. When men pretend to supernatural knowledge which they do not have, they are apt to bring on themselves their own punishment. The threat of being cut to pieces was not an idle one. This form of punishment, called dichotomy, was not an uncommon one. If it be doubted that Nebuchadnezzar would carry out such cruel punishment, one has only to remember the judgment he meted out on poor, wicked Zedekiah. He slew the king's nobles first, then the princes of the realm, then blinded the king, after which he was placed in fetters.

According to the workings of Babylonian sorcery, it was not unreasonable for them to request the king to inform them of the details of his dream. But they were asking for that which the king could not give. By this time there may have been doubts in his mind as to their ability and truthfulness. Nebuchadnezzar surmised that they were parrying for time, and hoped to postpone the matter until the king was in a better mood or in a frame of mind to let the entire subject pass. It might be possible, too, to get the dream from him in a more favorable hour.

Now God makes these heathen to condemn their own helplessness out of their own mouths, in order that He may show by vivid contrast how He can reveal His secret to His servants, though they are but men on the earth. Their argument was that, since this type of request had never been made by a king of his wise men, it was not reasonable to expect this of them. The fact that it had not been done was their evidence that it could not be done. There was no precedent in the matter. The magicians referred to the supreme gods of the Babylonians who alone were supposed to be able to solve such difficulties as confronted them. But, alas, these gods had no contact with man and did not communicate with him. Thus the matter was without the range of the human and natural. They should not be expected to know it.

Evidently Daniel was unaware of the matter till now, so he asks of the king a grant of time with the assurance that there will be an interpretation forthcoming. The reason the king granted him time when he would not give it to the wise men was that the king already was convinced of the lying of the Chaldeans when they tried to wring from him the dream before they would interpret it. Daniel made no such empty stipulation. The God who would and could give the interpretation of the dream, could also recover the dream which Nebuchadnezzar had lost. We have seen the failure and terror of the magicians. There was no power in them to answer the king. But mark the attitude of Daniel and his resource in prayer to God.

A sailor in a shipwreck was once thrown upon a small rock, and clung to it in great danger until the tide went down. "Say, Jim," asked his friends after he was rescued, "didn't you shake with fear when you were hanging on that rock?" "Yes; but the rock didn't," was the significant answer. So when we trust God, there is no need to fear, though we may have cause in ourselves to do so. Throughout the record the faith of Daniel and his humility are beautifully set forth.

In his statement Daniel gives a general hint that the dream of the king has to do with changes and successions of kingdoms. The trials of empires, with their times and seasons, are not a matter of fate or accident, as the pagan thought, but are determined by God. The very events that take place at different periods of world history are ordered of God. History is truly, as has often been said, His story. Sovereignly God can and does remove kings; power and rule are definitely delegated of God (Rom. 13:1-4). As with Solomon, the Lord gives wisdom to the wise. To him that hath it shall be given, said our Lord Jesus.

The intention of God in the dream was to disclose to Nebuchadnezzar the things that would transpire in the latter days. This is an expression which refers to the whole future including the days of the Messiah in the final period of history, before the eternal state. The future centuries were to be unveiled before the king. What a dream it was too! No dream before it nor since has revealed so much nor so great a span of world history, running, as it did, from the hour then present to the end of time on earth.

Have you ever wondered why the dream was given the king in the form of a colossal image? The figures and symbols of the Bible are exact, and they cannot be interchanged without doing harm to the intent of the sacred writer and indicting the Holy Spirit behind the human penman. The reason the figure of a man is set forth here is because God wanted to make known what would transpire during man's day, in the ages when man was holding sway and having his way in the earth. By the image the entire gamut of man's world rule is brought before us in one panoramic view, from start to finish.

After the Babylonian empire which ended with the grandson of Nebuchadnezzar, Belshazzar, another kingdom would arise which was to be inferior to Babylon. The Medo-Persian empire is the second as can be seen from the Book of Daniel itself (5:28, 8:20). Was this kingdom inferior politically to the first? Indeed, it was. Nebuchadnezzar ruled as an autocratic monarch. In Medo-Persia the power of the central government was limited by the increasing strength of the nobles and the growing independence of the provinces. Nebuchadnezzar's word was law and could not be questioned; but Darius the Mede was frustrated by the insistent demands of the nobles. The third kingdom was that of Greece under Alexander the Great which put an end to the Persian rule. It did have dominion over all the earth.

The fourth kingdom is the Roman which was in power when the Lord Jesus came to earth. In the time of this kingdom the Son of God was crucified, a method of execution known to this kingdom. After the crucifixion of Christ the Roman empire continued to exist for about five centuries, after it had been divided into East Roman and West Roman. All know how faithfully history has followed this prewritten outline of world empires. Nebuchadnezzar began the times of the Gentiles in 606-586 B.C. The Persian empire carried them on in 536 B.C.

The Grecian kingdom took the scene in 330 B.C. and in 65 B.C. came the Roman. Do not overlook the fact that these kingdoms, except the first, were not on the scene of history. Daniel could not have guessed his way down through so many centuries.

It is noteworthy that the metals of the image deteriorate. World rule does not advance and go upward, as some fondly think, but goes downward. In the Roman there is a mingling of iron and clay--two extremes, signifying in the first case strength and in the second weakness. That empire has shown a strange blending of imperialistic tendencies with democratic elements. When the stone strikes this image, it is broken in pieces. That which seems so stable and lasting in the eyes of men, will not stand in the day that God visits world monarchies with His wrath. We must not overlook the fact that the last kingdom has more than one form; there are the two-stage form and then the tenfold arrangement. This latter set-up has never been witnessed on earth, even to this hour. This can only mean that the Roman empire, long since in a period of decline and abeyance, has not fully run its prescribed course in world affairs. The ten toes (as we shall see more fully in chapter 7) are ten kings who bear rule at the same time, forming a confederated empire on the area of the old empire. The many diverse elements that made up the Roman Empire of old cannot be made to answer to the simultaneous reign of ten kings. If this view is held, what event will stand for the falling of the stone upon the image and grinding all to power before it is driven away by the wind as the chaff of the summer threshing-floors?

The stone which fell from heaven cannot be made to speak of the birth of Christ into the world, nor of the peaceful spread of His gospel. The coming of Christ into the world at Bethlehem cannot be made to mean a catastrophe like the smiting of the image with the stone. In the first coming Christ did not put an end to the Roman Empire, but the world power joined with the religious leaders of the day to put Him to death. The peaceful propagation of the gospel has nothing in common with the stone falling from heaven and crushing man's world dominion. We do not know, nor are we authorized by Scripture to say just when the final cataclysm will strike.

What of the relation of the nations of earth to this stone? After all, this is the primary concern of our passage in Daniel. It is the distinct testimony of the Word of God that the unbelieving nations will continue on in their rejection of the grace of God in Christ, until they are finally ready for judgment from which there will be no remedy (Matt. 21:44). The world system will be crushed by Christ and ground to powder; it will be so broken to pieces that it will be driven away as the chaff is on the summer threshing-floors. It was the custom in Palestine and in the Orient to winnow wheat on a high place. When thrown into the air, the light chaff was carried off with the wind, while the wheat fell to the ground and remained for the benefit of the farmer.

But when is the time of the fall of the stone? No one can say exactly, but there must precede the catastrophe the formation of a ten-kingdom confederation on the territory of the ancient Roman Empire. This coalition will have a supreme head, and he is presented to us in chapter 7 of this book as the little horn coming up from the Roman Empire. It is a political leader of great power and attractiveness. It is well to remember these Scriptures as we read in our papers and magazines and hear on our radios of the many attempts to further and

bring about universal and lasting peace. These efforts, when well-intentioned, are commendable and every heart will acquiesce in the desire that men shall be refrained from mortal conflict in any measure humanly possible. But God has indicated that ultimately peace must come through the personal activity of the Prince of Peace, the Lord Jesus Christ. But before He establishes peace on the earth, there must be a final reckoning with the nations who have turned from God.

There are some who are ready to deny that there could be such a thing as the reformation or renewal or revival of the old Roman Empire. It is quite evident that European thought is moving more and more along the lines of some counteragent to the increasing power and strength of the northern colossus of Russian Communism. Actually, the balance of power will be more than difficult to maintain in Europe or in the world for that matter, until there is a balancing force set against the rapacious beast of the north. How soon that coalition will come to realization it is foolhardy to say. Before these events fully head up in the end times, the Church which is the Body of Christ will have been caught away to heaven as the Lord promised (John 14:1-3; I Thess. 4:13-18). All believers now will be gone to be with the Lord before these final events are realized on earth. Let us be zealous to keep the broad outlines of what God has prophetically given, in their proper order and proper place.

The king could not help but be impressed by the wisdom the Lord had given. God had actually outlined world power from the reign of Nebuchadnezzar until the coming reign of the Lord Jesus Christ. Significantly enough, this chapter closes with Nebuchadnezzar down on his face before Daniel. This is but a faint foreshadowing of the way the world powers in a coming day will have to make obeisance to the greater than Daniel, that is, to the Lord Jesus Christ.