



# LifeLight

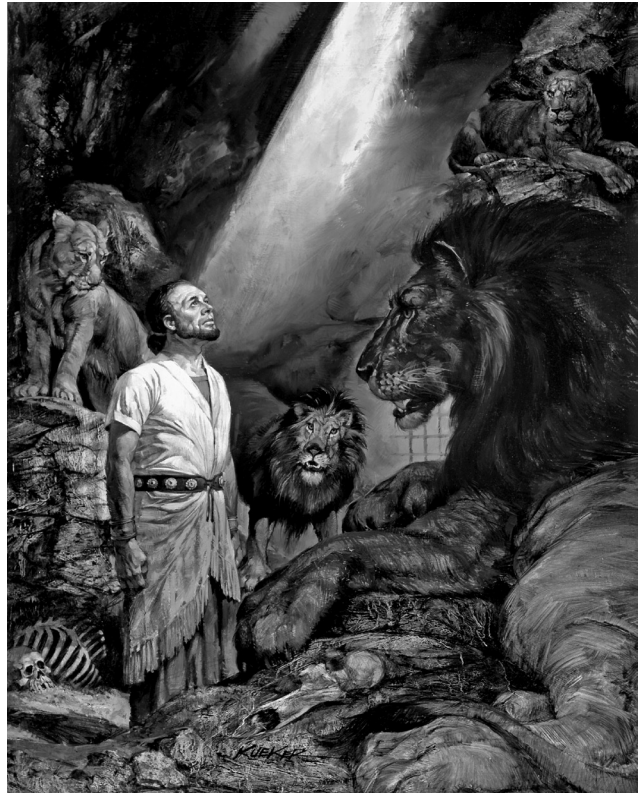
*"In Him was life, and the life was the light of men." John 1:4*

## Daniel

### LEADERS GUIDE

The Book of Daniel shows the triumph of God-given faith even in the most difficult of circumstances. Confronted with opportunities to compromise their faith and values, Daniel and his companions resisted the devil's ploys—even to the point of death. Saved from a fiery furnace and delivered from a den of lions, the saints in Daniel clung to our saving and delivering God.

God's mighty works recorded in Daniel caused lofty rulers to recognize that He is the Most High God, whose power is supreme and whose kingdom lasts forever. Even more, His revelation through Daniel about the Son of Man and the saints' inheritance of an eternal kingdom still inspires confidence in those who, like the saints of old, bear their cross in faith and hope.



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## Introduction

### Welcome to LifeLight

A special pleasure is in store for you. You will be instrumental in leading your brothers and sisters in Christ closer to Him who is our life and light (John 1:4). You will have the pleasure of seeing fellow Christians discover new insights and rediscover old ones as they open the Scriptures and dig deep into them, perhaps deeper than they have ever dug before. More than that, you will have the pleasure of sharing in this wonderful study.

### LifeLight—An In-depth Study

LifeLight is a series of in-depth Bible studies. The goal of LifeLight is that through a regular program of in-depth personal and group study of Scripture, more and more Christian adults may grow in their personal faith in Jesus Christ, enjoy fellowship with the members of His body, and reach out in love to others in witness and service.

*In-depth* means that this Bible study includes the following four components: individual daily home study; discussion in a small group; a lecture presentation on the Scripture portion under study; and an enhancement of the week's material (through reading the enrichment magazine).

### LifeLight Participants

LifeLight participants are adults who desire a deeper study of the Scriptures than is available in the typical Sunday morning adult Bible class. (Mid-to-older teens might also be LifeLight participants.) While LifeLight does not assume an existing knowledge of the Bible or special experience or skills in Bible study, it does assume a level of commitment that will bring participants to each of the nine weekly assemblies having read the assigned readings and attempted to answer the study questions. Daily reading and study will require from 15 to 30 minutes for the five days preceding the LifeLight assembly. The day following the assembly will be spent reviewing the previous week's study by going over the completed study leaflet and the enrichment magazine.

### LifeLight Leadership

While the in-depth process used by LifeLight begins with individual study and cannot achieve its aims without this individual effort, it cannot be completed by individual study alone. Therefore, trained leaders are necessary. You fill one or perhaps more of the important roles described below.

#### The Director

This person oversees the LifeLight program in a local center (which may be a congregation or a center operated by several neighboring congregations). The director

- serves as the parish LifeLight overall coordinator and leader;
- coordinates the scheduling of the LifeLight program;
- orders materials;
- convenes LifeLight leadership-team meetings;
- develops publicity materials;
- recruits participants;
- maintains records and budgeting;
- assigns, with the leadership team, participants to small discussion groups;
- makes arrangements for facilities;
- communicates outreach opportunities to small-group leaders and to congregational boards;
- follows up on participants who leave the program.

#### The Assistant Director (*optional*)

This person may assist the director. Duties listed for the director may be assigned to the assistant director as mutually agreeable.

#### The Lecture Leader

This person prepares and delivers the lecture at the weekly assembly. (**Lesson material for the lecture leader begins on p. 9.**) The lecture leader

- prepares and presents the Bible study lecture to the large group;
- prepares worship activities (devotional thought,

- hymn, prayer), using resources in the study leaflet and leaders guide and possibly other, outside sources;
- helps the small-group discussion leaders to grow in understanding the content of the lessons;
  - encourages prayer at weekly leadership-team and discussion-leaders meetings.

### **The Small-Group Coordinator** (*optional; the director may fill this role*)

This person supervises and coordinates the work of the small-group discussion leaders. The small-group coordinator

- recruits with the leadership team the small-group discussion leaders;
- trains or arranges for training of the discussion leaders;
- assists the director and discussion leaders in follow-up and outreach;
- encourages the discussion leaders to contact absent group members;
- participates in the weekly leadership-team and discussion-leaders equipping meetings;
- provides ongoing training and support as needed.

### **The Small-Group Discussion Leaders**

These people guide and facilitate discussion of LifeLight participants in the small groups. (**Lesson material for the small-group leaders begins on p. 57.**) There should be one discussion leader for every group of no more than twelve participants. The small-group discussion leaders are, perhaps, those individuals who are most important to the success of the program. They should, therefore, be chosen with special care and be equipped with skills needed to guide discussion and to foster a caring fellowship within the group. These discussion leaders

- prepare each week for the small-group discussion by using the study leaflet and small-group leaders guide section for that session;
- read the enrichment magazine as a study supplement;
- guide and facilitate discussion in their small group;
- encourage and assist the discussion group in prayer;

- foster fellowship and mutual care within the discussion group;
- attend weekly discussion-leaders training meetings.

## **Leadership Training**

LifeLight leaders will meet weekly to review the previous week's work and plan the coming week. At this session, leaders can address concerns and prepare for the coming session. LifeLight is a 1½-hour program with no possibility for it to be taught in the one hour typically available on Sunday mornings. Some congregations, however, may want to use the Sunday morning Bible study hour for LifeLight preparation and leadership training. In such a meeting, the lecture leader and/or small-group coordinator may lead the discussion leaders through the coming week's lesson, reserving 5 or 10 minutes for problem solving or other group concerns.

While it requires intense effort, LifeLight has proven to bring great benefit to LifeLight participants. The effort put into this program, both by leaders and by participants, will be rewarding and profitable.

## **The LifeLight Weekly Schedule**

Here is how LifeLight will work week by week:

1. Before session 1, each participant will receive the study leaflet for session 1 and the enrichment magazine for the course. The study leaflet contains worship resources (for use both in individual daily study and at the opening of the following week's assembly) and readings and study questions for five days. Challenge questions will lead those participants who have the time and desire a greater challenge into even deeper levels of study.
2. After the five days of individual study at home, participants will gather for a weekly assembly of all LifeLight participants. The assembly will begin with a brief period of worship (5 minutes). Participants will then join their assigned small discussion groups (of twelve or fewer, who will remain the same throughout the course), where they will go over the week's study questions together (55 minutes). Assembling together once again, participants will listen to a lecture presentation on the readings they have studied in the previous week and discussed in their small groups (20 minutes). After the lecture presentation, the director or another leader will distribute the study leaflet for the following week. Closing announcements and other necessary business may take another five minutes before dismissal.

In some places some small groups will not join the weekly assembly because of scheduling or other reasons. Such groups may meet at another time and place (perhaps in the home of one of the small group's members). Those congregations may record the lecture given by the lecture leader at the weekly assembly and duplicate it for use by other groups meeting later in the week.

3. On the day following the assembly, participants will review the preceding week's work by rereading the study leaflet they completed (and that they perhaps supplemented or corrected during the discussion in their small group) and by reading appropriate articles in the enrichment magazine.

Then the LifeLight weekly study process will begin all over again!

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## Recommended Study and Worship

### Resources

*Concordia Self-Study Bible*, New International Version. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1986. Interpretive notes on each page form a running commentary on the text. The book includes cross-references, a 35,000-word concordance, full-color maps, charts, and timelines.

Roehrs, Walter R., and Martin H. Franzmann. *Concordia Self-Study Commentary*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1979. This one-volume commentary on the Bible contains 950 pages and is tailored for lay use.

*Every Voice a Song: Pipe Organ Accompaniment for 180 Hymns and Liturgy*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House (order no. 99-1565). Use this music CD for worship hymn accompaniment.



## God Prepares His Helpers

### Daniel 1:1–21

*Preparing for the Session*

#### Central Focus

The central figure of the Book of Daniel seems to be Daniel himself. The first part of the book tells his life story. The second part reveals his visions. Yet this book is not about him. The core of his prophetic message is simple: God rules. We need not fear.

#### Objectives

The participants, led by the Holy Spirit working through God's Word, will

1. become familiar with the Book of Daniel, its purpose, and its message for them;
2. come to a clearer understanding of what it is for God to be God in all of life; and
3. celebrate their callings to live lives that give evidence of God's rule in Jesus Christ.

**Note for the small-group leaders:** Lesson notes and other materials you will need begin on page 57.

#### For the Lecture Leader

*Session Plan*

#### Worship

Begin the session with the hymn printed in the study leaflet. Accompaniments are available in denominational hymnals, such as *Lutheran Service Book* or *Lutheran Worship* (refer to hymnal index). (Note: Concordia Publishing House has available *Every Voice a Song*, a 9-CD set of organ accompaniments for 180 hymns and liturgy. All the initial worship hymns in the LifeLight courses are included in this resource. It's especially helpful for mission congregations and small parishes. See the list of study resources on page 7.) Follow with the prayer in the study leaflet.

### Lecture Presentation

#### Introduction: God Rules!

The central figure in the Book of Daniel may seem to be Daniel himself. The first half of the book (chapters 1 through 6) basically tells his life story. The second part (chapters 7 through 12) records his visions.

Yet this book is not about Daniel the man. The core of its prophetic message is simple: God rules. We need not fear.

God rules! Daniel affirms that God rules with His grace, mercy, and forgiveness. He rules over all history, and He will reign forever and ever. He rules in heaven above as well as in the world below, for the whole earth is filled with His glory (Isaiah 6:3). He rules through Jesus Christ, the Son of God and—as Daniel calls Him—the “Son of Man.”

God's reign is what the Book of Daniel is about, and therefore what this course is all about. Even the pagan king Nebuchadnezzar, with all his pomp and circumstance, will ultimately have to acknowledge the fact that “the Most High rules the kingdom of men” (Daniel 4:25). Or as Daniel succinctly puts it, “Heaven rules” (Daniel 4:26).

God rules—in the present tense! He rules already here and now, even though all evidence may seem to be to the contrary. To a suffering people who had lost control of their own affairs, the prophet Daniel brought the comfort of God's Word for the present and God's reassuring promises about a glorious future.

This Gospel remains good news for the people of God—including you and me—that the Lord rules. Today, some claim that the Church of our Lord Jesus has become irrelevant. You and the others in your class may belong to a very small congregation, perhaps one where numbers have dwindled in recent years. The area you serve may be isolated, away from the centers of social and political activity. In addition, you may see a world out of control and experience a personal life that seems constantly pressured by external and internal threats such as strife, financial problems, and sickness.

Yet even when all visible evidence points to the contrary, we can still believe the message of Daniel: God

rules! He rules for us. He rules through His Son, our gracious Savior, Jesus Christ. He rules in word and action through His Word and Sacraments as they come to you through your congregation. We are already citizens of heaven and will one day reign with Christ forever.

As we study the Book of Daniel, we will span the centuries between the days of Daniel and today. We will see how the national participants in the human drama have changed from Babylon and Persia to the United States, China, Russia, and many other places. But we also will see that no matter how powerful these nations seem to be, the Gospel remains the same. It will remain as our one and only rock even when all the kingdoms of this world pass away.

## 1. Old Testament Background for Daniel

Let's set the Book of Daniel in context. The Lord made and kept His promise to Abraham that he and his offspring would become a mighty nation (Genesis 12:1–3). Despite human weakness, barrenness, and four centuries of hardship in Egypt, God's people grew and thrived. Certainly, God remained true to Himself and His purposes. A mighty throng of people stood at the foot of Mount Sinai to be sealed as His people, as His precious treasure, as a kingly priesthood through whom God would show His boundless love to the whole world. There at Sinai, God revealed His very nature to Moses. He showed Moses his "steadfast" or "constant" love in a covenant that would direct God's dealings with His Old Testament people in all the days to come: Yahweh ("the Lord") is Yahweh. He is "a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin" (Exodus 34:6–7).

Under Joshua, God gave Israel the Promised Land of Canaan. The land was divided among the tribes as their special individual inheritances. As the land was apportioned, even down to each clan within the tribes, there was a sense of God's participation in land ownership: owning a piece of the Promised Land served as a visible pledge from God that each family had a place within God's eternal promised land in heaven. The Year of Jubilee, in which all land was returned to its original owner, served to keep that pledge intact (Leviticus 25:8–12).

In time, Israel demanded a king. The Lord's immediate rule through His Spirit-led judges gave way to a divinely directed monarchy. For God had accommodated the

people's plea to be like all the nations (1 Samuel 8:5). Putting it into our language, they might have said, "We want to have more class!" We can see the grace of God in answering their request, but at the same time, we can see the folly of demanding that God give us what *we* think best. The seeds of Israel's downfall were planted in the monarchy. Trouble ensued when people forgot who was *really* ruling.

A starry-eyed Israel began to enjoy the earthly monarchy under Saul and, later, King David. At that time, God prophesied the coming of the heavenly King, the Son of David, whose eternal kingdom would surpass and transcend all other kingdoms (2 Samuel 7:11–17). The kingdom of Israel reached its pinnacle in the days of Solomon. The sureness of God's promises was clearly in view: as God had promised Abraham that his descendants would be numbered like the sand of the seashore (Genesis 22:17), that promise was filled to the letter (1 Kings 4:20). The nation numbered in the millions, and Israel's borders expanded to include all the territory God had promised.

The other side of the history of God's gracious dealings with His people is the story of Israel's faithlessness. From the time of the golden calf onward, the times of "forgetting the covenant" were many. Time after time, Israel went her own way. The people rejected God's mercy, His care, and His protection. As they became proud in their own strength and took God's grace for granted, they lapsed into high-handed, hard-hearted sin.

Although they rarely denied God's existence, they seemed to think that they could worship all sorts of other gods at the same time. Such idol worship included gross and immoral fertility rites, temple prostitution, and even the sacrifice of children. God repeatedly warned the nation through His prophets, but few people listened or repented. The services in God's house would continue down to the day the temple was leveled, but the hearts and the faith of the people wandered elsewhere.

The kingdom of Israel went into a sharp decline, even during the final years of Solomon. Upon his death, the kingdom was split in half: the Northern Kingdom (Samaritans or "Israel") and the Southern Kingdom, made up of only the tribes of Judah and Benjamin. In 722 BC, the Northern Kingdom was conquered by the Assyrians and for all practical purposes, disappeared. The Southern Kingdom (Judah) would cling to life for more than another century, but the handwriting was on the wall. Feeble political alliances gave the people false temporary reassurances, but no alliance or other human in-

vention could save the Southern Kingdom from the new enemy on the horizon. In the late 600s BC, the Neo-Babylonian Empire became the new world power. It would be God's own instrument in carrying out His judgment on unrepentant sinners.

## 2. Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians

Nebuchadnezzar had been crown prince under his father Nabopolassar in the spring of 605 BC when he set out from Babylon on a campaign of conquest to the west. His father had been on the throne for a little more than twenty years, and had seen the shattering of Assyrian power and the conquest of the Assyrian capital Nineveh in 612. This important reign came to an end, however, when Nabopolassar died in the summer of 605.

Nebuchadnezzar rushed home to claim the throne. Then he returned to his army in the field, still in 605 BC. He completed a successful campaign mainly against the Egyptians, but as part of it, he subjugated Jerusalem. There Nebuchadnezzar took captives, including Daniel, and led them back to Babylon. Building on his father's accomplishments, Nebuchadnezzar became the founder of the Babylonian Empire that stretched from the Persian Gulf to Egypt. He tried to invade Egypt in 601, but he could not conquer it. This encouraged some kings in Syria and Palestine to rebel, including King Zedekiah of Judah. In response, Nebuchadnezzar conquered Jerusalem in 587. He destroyed the temple and deported the rest of Judah's people to Babylon.

Babylon's conquest of Judah and Jerusalem went relatively rapidly. Still, it did not happen overnight. In a sense, it began before Nebuchadnezzar's campaign in 605, when Judah's godly King Josiah died in 609 BC. At that time, Jerusalem started paying tribute to Babylon. We might call it "protection money." Inevitable destruction had been set in motion so far as God was concerned (see 2 Kings 22:16–17; 24:1).

Starting in 605 BC, there was a series of deportations of people from Judah to Babylon. The Babylonians intended to carry off the leaders (or potential leaders such as Daniel), leaving a helpless, aimless, and very controllable mass of people in the conquered territory. No leaders were left for anyone to rally around. No one from the royal line would be able to incite a rebellion. The first verse of Daniel's book tells us that Daniel, who stood out as a promising young man in every respect, went to Babylon in that very first group of deportees in 605 BC.

## 3. Daniel in Babylon (1:1–7)

Daniel's ministry lasted throughout the seventy-year Babylonian captivity and even beyond it, into the period of Persian world domination. Apparently, and for some unknown reason, Daniel remained in Babylon even after the captivity was officially over. He lived to a ripe old age.

As the saying goes, "Bloom where you are planted!" This is what Daniel did by God's grace. As those who are redeemed, restored, and forgiven, God's children can flourish under His blessing wherever they happen to find themselves in this fallen world. Regardless of where we are, how we got there, or how rough our lives may get because of sin, we always remain "more than conquerors through Him who loved us" (Romans 8:37).

*(You might pause and suggest that participants mention some modern-day examples in which children of God have flourished under seemingly impossible circumstances.)*

As we scan chapter 1 and see Daniel's success in a foreign land, it would be easy to lapse into sheer moralizing. We could set up Daniel simply as a saint to be imitated—as an example of courage, determination, and moral fiber. We could then chastise ourselves and browbeat our brothers or sisters by posing the question, do we do as well as Daniel did? Or even worse, what's wrong with us? Why haven't we done as well as Daniel? Unfortunately, we often use this method with our children in attempts to get them to shape up. This approach, however, will surely leave us—and all who listen to us—more discouraged than anything.

Instead, remember the theme of Daniel's book. We don't look to Daniel, we look to Daniel's God! At every turn, continually remind yourself that the main topic is what God has done and is doing and will do, not what Daniel or any other sinner is doing. The real question is not what Daniel has accomplished, but rather, what is a powerful and gracious God accomplishing in and through Daniel? By the way, if the Lord of heaven and earth could accomplish such great things through Daniel, He can accomplish great things through you and me too.

The heart of the matter is this: Daniel was leading a life in the Gospel. Through visions and the comforting Word of God, Daniel knew that God the Father, the Ancient of Days, was winning the total victory over sin, death, and the devil, through His beloved, the Son of Man. Even when the world was collapsing all around,

Daniel knew that God's victory was making its effect felt already in the here and now—certainly God reigned over all things. As Daniel shared already in the victory of God's grace and saw things as they really are, Daniel's whole life was transformed by God's power. This is still the go-power for the Christian life today. It is the Good News that encourages and never discourages.

The opening words of the book describe Nebuchadnezzar's storming of Jerusalem in 605 BC. The battle was seen in the usual Old Testament way, as a contest between the true God and the enemy's false god or gods. By placing sacred vessels from the temple of God at Jerusalem into his own idolatrous temple, Nebuchadnezzar feebly attempted to show the superiority of his Babylonian deities. Of course, this empty show did not change the truth, as we know full well. Daniel knew it too.

The account of this first siege of Jerusalem is recorded in 2 Kings with a parallel account in 2 Chronicles. These accounts are noteworthy, because they describe the utter corruption of King Jehoiakim. They also point out the underlying strategy behind the deportations. The Babylonians hoped to crush opposition among the citizens of Judah left in the land. They also hoped to gain from the talents of Judah's best and brightest youths.

The "makeover" of Daniel and his friends into Babylonians involved a change of names, but certainly not a change of heart. Their original names, given to them back home in Judah at the time of their circumcisions, all reflect the true Gospel faith of Israel. The names bear the endings *-el* or *-iah*, both of which are abbreviated names for the one true God. Their new names included the names of Babylonian deities. For example, Daniel's name, "God is [my] judge," was changed to Belteshazzar, "May Bel [Baal] protect his life." This name change was only the beginning of a systematic brainwashing process designed to change the identities of the captives from Judahites to Babylonian officials, loyal to their new king and his gods.

## 4. Daniel Settles In (1:8–21)

Reading of Daniel's resistance to the delicacies of the Babylonian aristocracy can bring the same temptation to moralizing that we noted earlier. Daniel's insistence on a basic diet could elicit cries of "Eat only healthy foods!" or "Watch your fat intake!" Or even worse, "Maybe we should become vegetarians too!"

Much more was at stake, though. The dietary laws of the Pentateuch could be broken by eating unclean foods, and Daniel wanted to avoid this. He also wanted to minimize the eating of food that had been offered to idols. Daniel was honoring God while obeying the Fourth Commandment in the foreign land of Babylon. (See the article, "Why Won't Daniel Eat the King's Food?" on page 5 of the enrichment magazine.)

You and I live as members of a minority in a pagan world. The temptation also comes to us to give up on the Lord's will and way. No doubt Daniel and his friends were sorely tempted to rationalize and excuse disobedience under the circumstances. But they didn't.

Why can't we be like that? That is a good question. If we go no further than it takes us, though, we can miss the real point here. Remember again the subject of Daniel's book: the kingdom of God and what God was doing.

God was the one who caused the Babylonians to be favorably disposed toward Daniel and to deal so kindly with him. And it was God who gave Daniel his pink cheeks and vitality. (After all, who of us can take the personal credit for any good health we might enjoy?) If anything is to be said about Daniel himself, it is that the power of God overflowed into his life. Just as, by the way, the Lord wants it to overflow into our lives too! Daniel is not the hero. Nor are we. Our hero is the Lord!

The last section of Daniel 1 deals with the success enjoyed by Daniel and his friends. Once more, note the power of God. (Compare verse 5 with verse 20.) In the space of three years, they became ten times better and wiser than all those who had attended Babylonian schools all their lives. Why was Daniel so skilled in the interpretation of dreams? Little did the Babylonians know that Daniel was utilizing the wisdom that comes from above, not the wisdom resulting from the feeble musings of pagans.

Proverbs 1:7 says, "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge." Wisdom is a gift from God granted to those who believe. Daniel appears to be insightful, but God was the one who was doing it all through Daniel. Daniel knew that true wisdom is not *insight*, a searching for inner resources, but rather "*outsight*"—looking outside ourselves toward our Lord, who grants us every good and perfect gift.

In the final analysis, what is wisdom? The answer to this question plumbs the very depths of the kingdom of God and how it is at work in the Book of Daniel. Christ Himself is the wisdom of God (1 Corinthians 1:24)!

Thus, the story of the Book of Daniel is the story of Jesus Christ— alive, well, active, and freely granting all His blessings of salvation right here in our world. Daniel’s story is Christ’s story and, along with Daniel, our story and the story of His whole Church. For Daniel in his day and for us in ours, Christ is our life. Throughout the ages of this world, He remains the “Son of Man [who] has authority on earth to forgive sins” (Matthew 9:6).

The last verse of Daniel 1 tells us that Daniel’s illustrious career, spent entirely in a foreign land, lasted about seventy years. Yes, Daniel the prophet was an Israelite serving foreign kings, not unlike Joseph served Pharaoh in Egypt centuries earlier. Having entered the service of Babylonian monarchs as a young boy, Daniel lived long enough to see Babylon fall to the Persians and to serve Persian rulers. He may have been pushing one hundred years of age when he left this world to see with his own eyes the Kingdom he had preached.

Daniel lived at a time of great geopolitical upheaval. God used the kings of Babylon and Persia to accomplish His goal of moving history forward to the ultimate goal of the birth of Jesus, the Messiah. Through Daniel, the Kingdom bloomed where God had planted it, and in a place that seemed entirely unfertile for it. Daniel and his listeners had learned an important lesson. The lesson carries over into our day in the Christian Church.

## Conclusion

What specifically is it that identifies us as citizens of God’s kingdom? This Kingdom is not a particular city or country. It does not consist of a particular form of government. It is not found in outward slavery or political freedom, in poverty or in riches. The Kingdom is where the King is. It is found wherever the Gospel is preached and wherever two or three are gathered together in the name of our Lord (Matthew 18:20). The Kingdom is where *you* are as you gather with other believers around the Word of God, Baptism, and the Lord’s Supper.

Rejoice in this Kingdom. Relax in the peace your blood-bought citizenship gives. Trust that God is in control, no matter what outward circumstances may look like. He will preserve you in faith and bring you safely into His eternal, heavenly kingdom.

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## Concluding Activities

Close with a prayer incorporating key thoughts from the lesson. Then distribute study leaflet 2 as participants leave.

## God Reveals the Future

### Daniel 2:1–49

#### *Preparing for the Session*

#### Central Focus

The good news in the Book of Daniel is that God is in control for the sake of His Church. Not only does God give the only insight into the future, He also claims ultimate control over every earthly kingdom.

#### Objectives

The participants, led by the Holy Spirit working through God's Word, will

1. affirm that God is God in all things, including the future;
2. become stronger in their confidence that God remains with them through Christ in the present, and acts for their ultimate salvation in the future; and
3. rejoice in the confidence with which they can face the future because of the constant presence and power of God's Spirit in their lives.

**Note for the small-group leaders:** Lesson notes and other materials you will need begin on page 59.

#### For the Lecture Leader

##### *Session Plan*

#### Worship

Begin the session with the hymn printed in the study leaflet. Accompaniments are available in denominational hymnals, such as *Lutheran Service Book* or *Lutheran Worship* (refer to hymnal index). (Note: Concordia Publishing House has available *Every Voice a Song*, a 9-CD set of organ accompaniments for 180 hymns and liturgy. All the initial worship hymns in the LifeLight courses are included in this resource. It's especially helpful for mission congregations and small parishes. See the list of study resources on page 7.) Follow with the prayer in the study leaflet.

### Lecture Presentation

#### Introduction

The dreams in Daniel contain many things that seem unreal and unnatural. Yet such is the nature of dreams. Think of your own dreams for a moment. Did you ever dream that you could fly? Did you ever dream that you were running away, but then your legs suddenly got so heavy you couldn't move? Did you ever dream that you were continually falling but never seemed to land or hurt yourself? In the same way, dreams in the Bible are not bound by the laws of nature or the world of our common experience when they communicate wonderful truths about God.

Consider Nebuchadnezzar's dream in Daniel 2. Did you ever hear of a stone that seemed to have a mind and will of its own and that could grow by itself to the size of a mountain? Perhaps the Lord communicated through dreams precisely because His divine message, His Word about heavenly things, is far beyond our ordinary experience.

The dreams in Daniel present some symbols we cannot begin to interpret and others about which we are just not sure. Perhaps we are not supposed to figure out some of the symbols simply because the Lord doesn't want us to know, or because He wants to emphasize their relative unimportance. Some features of the dreams may merely hold the dreams together and were never intended to mean anything specific. The point is this: even though we may be missing some of the details, the punch line of each and every dream remains quite clear. You already know the main thrust of the dreams in Daniel because you know the thrust of the whole book, the message of the kingdom of God.

This first dream in the book, in chapter 2, stands out as particularly helpful because Daniel tells the interpretation for it. By giving us the key to this first dream, God is giving us the key for unlocking the meaning of all the dreams that follow. God is telling us something about the method of interpretation as well. Dreams are not meant to stand on their own. The Book of Daniel shows us that dreams are to be interpreted in accordance with all of God's revelation in Scripture. They are to be made clear by the Scriptures that present us with unmistak-

able statements of God's truth. Here, as so often, Scripture interprets Scripture.

Invariably, Daniel's visions and dreams focus on the future. Yet they do not simply look into the time ahead. They present the unfolding and the workings of the kingdom of God now in this present time and into eternity, the only future that really counts. Nowhere in the Book of Daniel is there one bit of *futurism*—a fascination with the future for its own sake. Jesus tells us, "Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble" (Matthew 6:34). Some people today are very much like the Babylonians who were obsessed with the future. Their dream interpreters, astrologers, and necromancers (those who "communicated" with the dead) never seemed to be short of work. But God makes it clear that the future is His territory. What, then, does He tell us about the future? God brings us the only thing we need to know about it: the kingdom of God is eternal, and the King, our Lord Jesus, reigns forever and ever. Thus, when some of Daniel's symbols seem vague, we can take comfort knowing that God Himself is working out the details. Meanwhile, we have what we need, the knowledge that God's mercy and forgiveness reign supreme.

One last point of introduction: for the believer who is a part of the kingdom of God, the future is always now! To be sure, God's final victory over sin, evil, and the evil one will occur on the Last Day in a way that all can see it with their own eyes. Yet through the eyes of faith, and as the Gospel of the Kingdom is proclaimed, we know that every blessing of the Kingdom is ours already now. The eternal victory of the King and of His kingdom has been ours all along, all the way back to the time when the Father promised that His Son would crush the serpent.

The phrase often used in the Church to describe our present enjoyment of future blessings is *even now, but not yet*. Today we want to be on prayerful guard against teachings that would have us invest our faith only in the future. Millennialist doctrine, for example, can rob us of all the blessings we can enjoy now—in this life—from God's gracious hand. Such teachings tell us, Someday (maybe) you will be blessed. Someday the devil will be defeated, and Christ will be victorious.

No, Christ's victory is ours even now! With Daniel, we can praise our victorious God now as we await the ultimate coming of His kingdom on the Last Day.

## 1. The King Has a Dream (2:1–11)

The ancient pagan world attached a great deal of significance to dreams. Dreams were thought to be of divine origin and thought to hold the key to the future. Sometimes kings would sleep inside their heathen temples in the hope of receiving a message from their god or gods in a dream. As was the case with Nebuchadnezzar, most dreams were meaningless unless interpreted in a way that deciphered the code of the dream.

In Daniel 2, we see something that rarely happens in Scripture. Here, someone outside the fold of believers receives a legitimate dream from God. Yet even though Nebuchadnezzar received a genuine dream from the true God, he was totally powerless to discover its meaning. He did not know the God who gave him the dream and who held the key to unlock it. This is where Daniel came in.

Perhaps the pivotal word in the whole chapter is the word found in verses 18 and 19, translated as *mystery* or *secret*. For our purposes, it will be called *the key*, because it unlocks and reveals. In answer to his prayer, Daniel was granted an extraordinary privilege: he was permitted to see the key that would unlock the meaning of this and other dreams. The key lies in the heart and mind of God Himself. The key involves what God thinks and feels about the present and the future. Just imagine—an all-powerful God who takes one poor sinner into His confidence, telling one mortal what He is doing and what His present and future dealings with the whole world are all about! This key can be distilled down to one phrase you have heard before. The key is the kingdom of God.

In the last session, we mentioned that the Church has lost much of the respect it used to command and much of the influence it used to exert. We in the Church may feel, as we say, out of the loop. Whole circles of society exclude us and do not confide in us. The business world plunges onward as though we didn't exist. On an individual level, we may feel even more out of it. Our own children may be convinced that we don't understand them. Nobody seems to come to us for advice.

When you start to feel "out of the loop," individually or collectively, remember the message of Daniel. Remember that you have been intimately drawn into the most important "loop" there can be. God, the maker of heaven and earth, the Savior of the whole world, the one who rules all things, has confided in you! Through His

precious Word, He tells you His very heart and mind. Ponder Jesus' words to the disciples: "To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 13:11). Notice that the key to understanding the dreams in Daniel and the key to the parables of Jesus is the same: the Kingdom!

Have you ever awakened in the morning feeling extremely depressed or elated, but were not quite sure why? You may guess that a dream has affected your emotions, probably your last dream before waking. Try as you might, though, you can't remember what that dream was. This seems to have been the case with Nebuchadnezzar. He had several dreams during the night, but one dream in particular (probably the last one) greatly troubled him. As soon as he woke up, the memory of the dream was gone.

As chapter 2 of Daniel begins, Nebuchadnezzar was a young man in only the second year of his reign. The young king had tasted nothing but victory. He seemed to have nothing but bright prospects for the future. Nebuchadnezzar was on top of the world. He had absolutely no reason to be upset about anything. He wanted to clear up this disturbing dream as soon as he possibly could.

Calling together his whole cabinet of advisers, the king gave the order: first, tell me what the dream was, and second, tell me what it means (vv. 2, 6). To impress upon his advisers the depth of his worry and the urgency of his command, he said, in effect, "Do it now . . . or else!" He held in his hands the power of life and death, and he would not hesitate to use it (v. 5).

One can imagine the terror in the hearts of the wise men. Even under the best of circumstances, their "wisdom" probably did not consist so much of actual knowledge as it amounted to their ability to handle and soothe their brash, young, egotistical king. If these so-called wise men could get Nebuchadnezzar to tell them what the dream was, there was a good chance that they could manufacture something to appease him (vv. 4–7). The whole corps of advisers addressed him in super-polite terms, such as "O king, live forever" (v. 4)! Finally, however, Nebuchadnezzar lost patience with their stalling (vv. 8–9).

Then the wise men had to throw up their hands in despair and come clean: they were not up to the task the king had placed before them (vv. 10–11). What they said is interesting in three respects. First, their weakness stands in stark contrast to the wisdom and omnipotence of the true God. Second, their futility was only

magnified by their lame appeal to their false gods. The king, the wise men, and the gods could not do a thing. Third, laying aside for the moment the fact that the gods of Babylon did not exist, the wise men confessed with their own lips just why their gods were so feeble. Their inherent weakness was that they did not dwell with human beings, that is, with flesh-and-blood people here on earth.

Make careful note of those words! They state the exact opposite of what the whole Book of Daniel confesses about the one true God. Daniel is about the kingdom of God. God rules, not only in heaven but also upon the earth. At the heart of the Kingdom stands the King Himself. Not only has God dwelt with flesh-and-blood people, He even became flesh in the person of His Son, Jesus Christ. It is not too much to say that the Kingdom is Christ, and Christ is God dwelling with His people—loving, forgiving, and saving us. This forms the key that opened up the big, wide world of God's grace for Daniel. Our God is Immanuel, God with us: in our daily struggles, our deepest joys, our worst crises. He has come to save us, to help us, to rescue us.

## 2. God Sends Daniel to the Rescue (2:12–24)

Daniel had not yet been called upon the scene. A problem as pressing as Nebuchadnezzar's required the services of his most experienced advisers, but Daniel was either still in training or had just recently completed it. In any case, the mindless fury of Nebuchadnezzar was to be vented upon all of his wise men, including Daniel and his friends (2:12).

The prayer of Daniel and his friends proves instructive (vv. 17–18). At the time, Daniel was on the other end of the civilized world from his homeland. His own people had lost control over their affairs back home. Hundreds of miles away from God's house of prayer in Jerusalem, Daniel still knew that God was always with him wherever he might be. We know this too. The Lord hears and helps His children, whether we find ourselves at the ends of the earth or at the end of our ropes.

God's answer to Daniel's prayer came in the form of a night vision (v. 19). The term *vision* should probably be distinguished from the *dream* experienced by Nebuchadnezzar. Visions, reserved for those who believe, appear to be more specifically designed for the bearing of revelations from God. God's answer to Daniel's prayer was twofold in that God told Daniel what Nebuchadnezzar's dream was and then also gave the interpreta-

tion of it. Only the original Author of the king's dream could retell it.

Reading Daniel, we do not see the content of God's answer at this point, but only Daniel's joyous reaction to it. The suspense of the chapter builds toward its end, when the reader and Nebuchadnezzar both hear God's message at the same time. Note once again that Daniel's superior wisdom does not constitute a tribute to Daniel himself, but rather to Daniel's God. Here is a recurring emphasis in the Book of Daniel: even though Daniel's people were living under Babylonian oppression, the true God was vastly superior in every respect to all the gods of Babylon put together.

Daniel doesn't run to the king with the answer right away. Instead, he first offers a prayer of praise and thanks (vv. 20–23). He confesses that everything belongs to God. God blesses His people with more than what they would ever need, giving wisdom to those He chooses. God has control of history, setting up kings and deposing them whenever He wants. This truth plays a large part in the dream's interpretation at the end of the chapter.

Daniel says that God "changes times and seasons" (v. 21). World history does not plunge onward, following its own prescribed path. God is a personal God who has a heart for His people. He can respond on the spot to their needs. He can alter the course of events in any situation.

### 3 • The Dream Explained: God's Eternal Kingdom (2:25–49)

*(Leader note: The explanation that follows is the traditional, majority opinion of the Church on the meaning of the individual symbols. There is not enough space to discuss divergent opinions at every turn. In a sense, the precise meaning of each detail doesn't matter. The different metals are clearly world political powers, all lumped together in one grotesque idol—and a very fragile one at that!)*

We join the scene as it is unfolding. A huge statue appears (v. 31). At first glance, the statue is very impressive because of its sheer size, but at second glance, we are not impressed. It just stands there, doing nothing and staring out into space. It is dumb, in more ways than one. Its feet of clay mixed with iron make it exceptionally vulnerable; the whole thing will soon tumble like a house of cards (v. 33).

This statue is made up of four world empires, which together form one vast idol. The word designating the statue also is used for the images of false gods. The stat-

ue represents one great, false tribute to pride and to the vainglory of sinful humanity. The four empires are symbolized by metals of decreasing value to show that humanity will continue to go downhill in sin. There will never be a utopia in this sinful world.

The gold part of the idol is Babylon herself, whose rise to world domination coincides roughly with the start of Daniel's ministry (vv. 37–38). Long before Daniel's time, Isaiah had predicted the collapse of Babylon, describing the land as shattered idols (Isaiah 21:9). To a country that thought she was the "last word" in world supremacy, Daniel can say, "What are you talking about? You will soon be history, and I can tell you right now about three other empires that will bite the dust after you are dead and gone!"

The silver part is the kingdom of the Medes and Persians, which rose to power under King Cyrus in 539 BC (v. 39). Daniel lived to witness this. The kingdom of Babylon would not even last all of Daniel's lifetime.

But the Persian Empire was not the last word either. Next would come the bronze kingdom of Greece. Alexander the Great, a world traveler and conqueror by age 20, killed the last Persian potentate before he himself died at age 33. His incurable ego led him to name literally hundreds of cities after himself. (Leader, please take careful note: thus far in the interpretation of the king's dream, we are more than two centuries beyond Daniel's earthly lifetime. It is only skeptics and unbelievers who think that God's prophets could not predict the future. God can see from His heavenly vantage point the whole sweep of human history in one glance.) Many think, by the way, that the statue's two bronze thighs stand for the division of Alexander's kingdom into a southern half (Egypt) and the northern half (Syria).

The fourth kingdom, "strong as iron," is the Roman Empire, which captured Jerusalem in 63 BC (v. 40). Rome was a mixture of iron and clay—on the whole strong like iron, yet beset by built-in weaknesses. All the countries Rome conquered eventually became like spinning plates—too many for Rome to keep juggling.

This is the overall scheme of Nebuchadnezzar's dream. Whole books could be written to fill in other details. Beware, however, of complex theories about the end times, all of which are beside the point of the Gospel!

The heart of the dream's meaning is the rock that destroys the giant idol (vv. 44–45). This rock—solid, enduring, and sure to come—is the kingdom of God, which endures forever. Jesus, the rock of our salvation,

established this Kingdom by His death and rising again to life. His church used the Roman Empire as a springboard for explosive growth as the Kingdom spread throughout the world. That growth is represented by the rock's growth to the size of a mountain.

King Nebuchadnezzar heard the meaning of his dream and reacted positively, even though it predicted his own downfall (vv. 46–49). Many see in verse 47 Nebuchadnezzar's conversion to the true faith. This is, of course, possible, but if it is correct, his conversion was a short-lived one. More about that in the next session.

## Conclusion

"A history of the world in newspaper format was printed some years ago. It was a fascinating presentation in tabloid form with headlines and pictures . . . a unique way of making history 'come alive.' But there was one strange feature of this history. It wasn't 'His-story.' The author had carefully contrived to totally eliminate the account of the birth and life of Christ. He had written a history of the world *as if Christ had never existed!*" (Donald L. Deffner, "Tomorrow We'll Be There," *The Concordia Pulpit for 1977* [St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1976], p. 20).

Nebuchadnezzar's dream, and especially Daniel's interpretation of it, shows the total foolishness of this project. Everything that is not built on the rock of Christ will go up in flames. This fact serves simultaneously to warn us and comfort us. Christ's kingdom, which now graciously comes to us through Word and Sacrament, will in the end come triumphantly, visibly, and irresistibly. In the words of Jesus Himself, "Blessed is the one who is not offended by Me" (Matthew 11:6).

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## Concluding Activities

Close with a prayer incorporating key thoughts from the lesson. Then distribute study leaflet 3 as participants leave.