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THE FUTURE IN A DREAM

The kingdom of Judah was never really the same after the Assyrian invasion. There was a brief period during the decline of the Assyrian Empire and the rise of the Babylonian Empire when Judah regained some of its influence under the God-fearing king, Josiah. But this precious moment lasted only a few short years. King Josiah was killed in battle, and his wicked son who tried to succeed Josiah was deposed by the Egyptians. The Egyptians then appointed Josiah’s second son to the throne, demanding tribute from him. But a new threat from the north, the Babylonians, led by King Nebuchadnezzar, brought an end to Egyptian influence in Judah, and replaced it with the demands of the Babylonians.

In time, the king of Judah rebelled against the Babylonians, bringing a rapid response from the nearby Babylonian outposts. Hostages from Judah were taken into Babylon and one of these hostages was Daniel. A new king gained the throne in Judah named Jehoiachin. When this young eighteen-year old king had ruled only three months, the main army of the Babylonians arrived, capturing Jerusalem and deporting the king and 10,000 other citizens of Jerusalem. A year later, Jerusalem was ransacked and burned. God’s patience with His people was exhausted. The nation which God had established to shine as His light in the world was extinguished. The Exile had begun.

The book of Daniel opens with King Nebuchadnezzar selecting a number of young men to go through a three-year course of instruction for service to the royal court. They were to be healthy, handsome, bright

young men. Daniel was one of the four Jewish boys selected, the others being Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. But, since they were now captives of Babylon, the king changed their names to Belteshazzar, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. Through these four Hebrews, the Lord would continue to work His miracles, demonstrating His power and might throughout Israel's exile.

To many of God's people who had seen their land and temple destroyed, it appeared as if the Lord had deserted them. But, He had not, and His activity through these faithful followers would demonstrate that even though His people had turned from Him and suffered the consequences of their rebellion, the Lord stood ready to forgive and restore. Although we may feel the Lord has abandoned us in times of crisis, He continues to work His wonders in ways we might never expect.

Daniel immediately demonstrated his faithfulness to the Lord when the king demanded his youth-in-training should eat food and drink from the royal table. The food from the royal table often violated the dietary laws of the Hebrews, so Daniel persuaded those in charge to feed the Jewish men only vegetables and water. Of course, there were misgivings. Those responsible for the health of these youths feared such a diet would be less than adequate so Daniel persuaded them to test the diet for a period of ten days. At the end of ten days, the Jewish youths looked healthier than any of the other young men.

Should that surprise us? Today we find more and more people turning to vegetarian diets for reasons of health. And they claim greater energy and better health as a result. Daniel's experience demonstrates the truth of some of

our modern dietary claims. Personally, I would find such a diet compelling were it not for my obsession with Big Macs and Bacon-burgers.

With God's help, the four Hebrew men outshone all the others in training. Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah mastered the Babylonian literature on astrology and divination by dreams. When King Nebuchadnezzar interviewed them, he found them ten times more astute than the rest. Their wisdom overwhelmed all the magicians and enchanters in the kingdom. And remember, the other "wise men" of Babylon were supposed to have plumbed the depths of human wisdom. They were the experts. But, the wisdom of the Hebrews overshadowed that of Babylon's best thinkers.

When we reflect on the prophet Daniel, we usually think of his ordeal in the lion's den. And indeed, his deliverance from the lion's sharp teeth requires us to consider this one of the Bible's great miracles. But, the reputation surrounding this miracle tempts us to neglect another great miracle encountered by the prophet, the one we find in the early chapters of the book of Daniel. That is why we wish to consider the moment when Daniel was given the discernment to interpret one of Nebuchadnezzar's more disturbing dreams.

The dream was so disturbing, King Nebuchadnezzar couldn't sleep, so he called in the kingdom's astrologers, sorcerers, magicians and enchanters. Now, with this kind of occult power at one's disposal, one would think great things could be accomplished. In order to test the validity of their interpretation, the king told these "wise men" that they must determine the substance of the dream before they gave its interpretation. And if they couldn't divine the dream's essence, they would be put to

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death. Well, of course, all these charlatans squirmed and pleaded, arguing that no one could interpret the dream without being told its content. They begged the king to tell them what the dream was all about. But, he refused. If they were so smart, the king figured, they ought to be able to figure it out on their own. So the king ordered all the “wise men” of Babylon to be executed.

Have you ever seen such a temper?

Unfortunately, Daniel and his friends were also considered part of the “wise men.” They, too, were under the king’s edict to be executed. But Daniel, inspired by the Lord to speak with tact and wisdom to the commander of the king’s army, convinced the commander to give him and his friends the time to discover and decipher the king’s dream. And that night, the Lord revealed to him the substance and interpretation of the dream.

And what was the dream about? It was about the future. But, before Daniel explained the dream to the king, he wanted to be sure the king understood that no sorcerer or enchanter,

or mere mortal would be able to solve the dream’s mystery. It could only be known and understood by the power of God. In this way, Daniel credited the miracle to God, and by giving God the glory, Daniel witnessed his faith to the king of the Babylonians. Daniel was taken captive by the Babylonians and forced to learn their culture, but if Daniel was influenced by the Babylonian court, so too was he able to influence that court. The Lord, although allowing great tragedy to befall Daniel and his friends, used the disaster to bring about a profound testimony of His power and strength to the king of Babylon.

In his dream, the king saw a large, dazzling statue. The head of the statue was made of pure gold, its chest and arms consisted of silver, its belly and thighs of bronze, its legs were iron, and its feet consisted partly of iron and partly of clay. A stone came hurtling out of nowhere, smashing the clay feet. The whole statue then disintegrated into fine dust and was blown away by the wind. Then the stone which had been hurled grew into a huge mountain and filled the whole earth.

And this was Daniel's interpretation: The gold head represented the Babylonian Empire led by Nebuchadnezzar himself. The second part of the statue made of silver represented a kingdom which would arise after the Babylonians, but would not be as powerful. The third part of the statue made of bronze represented the rise of a third kingdom which would cover the whole world. And the bottom part of the statue, made of iron and clay, represented a fourth kingdom which would be as strong as iron. Even as it was made partly of clay and iron, this empire would be divided, a mixture of different people, and although it would have the strength of iron, it would also have the brittleness of clay. The rock that destroyed all parts of the statue and then grew to fill the earth represented the kingdom established by God. This kingdom would crush all the other kingdoms and last forever.

Now history suggests that this prophecy was fulfilled over the next few centuries. The Medo-Persia Empire replaced the Babylonian Empire when the city of Babylon fell to Cyrus in 539 BC. It was Cyrus, who let God's people return to their homeland following the exile. The empire represented by the bronze belly and thighs would be fulfilled in the Greek Empire established by Alexander the Great, who, when he reached India, reportedly cried because there was no more of the known world to conquer. The iron and clay legs and feet would represent the Roman Empire, which covered the known world and incorporated people from numerous nations. Some have even suggested the diminishing value of the metals found in the statue suggest the decreasing power of the heads of those empires.

Nebuchadnezzar ruled with an iron fist. He was a despot. But, by the time of Rome, the government incorporated more checks and balances, a more democratic system characterized by the Roman senates and

assemblies. That is why the Roman Empire is described as both tough as iron and venerable as clay. Such is the appearance of a democracy. Haven't you ever watched congress "work," shaking your head in amazement that anything is accomplished through this form of government?

The rock which came out of nowhere and smashed the other kingdoms, of course, represented God's Kingdom. It would arise during the Roman Empire and overtake the earth. Isn't it interesting that Nebuchadnezzar would be given this symbol of God's Kingdom considering Jesus' pronouncement to Peter: "On this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it" (Matthew 16:18). Jesus uses the same symbol for the work of God's Kingdom as God uses in His dream to the Babylonian king. Our Lord is full of consistency!

Nebuchadnezzar, having heard his dream described and interpreted, fell at Daniel's feet as if to worship him. He gave Daniel an offering and presented incense to him. But, most importantly, the king declared, "Surely your God is the God of gods, and the Lord of kings and a revealer of mysteries, for you were able to reveal this mystery" (Daniel 2:47). Daniel's witness had been effective. Through the prophecy, Nebuchadnezzar saw the hand of God and confessed his belief in His all-powerful nature. Naturally, Daniel was rewarded. He was made ruler over the entire province of Babylon, and made supervisor over all Babylon's wise men. Through Daniel's influence, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were appointed administrators over Babylon.

One of the profound aspects of this miracle involves the Lord's role as the God of history. Most of the great religions of the world have put God outside mankind's world and history. Daniel's miracle underscores a God who is concerned not only with the affairs of the individual, but is also

Lord over the great streams of historical process. God is at work in human history. He remains in control. And God's intervention in the process of history means there is significance in our lives. We are part of the process which our God is directing. History is not some sort of endless hamster wheel, repeating itself over and over again into eternity. There is a beginning to it all, and there will be a meaningful conclusion to it all. And God has given us the privilege of playing a role in the unfolding process.

We know there are many people today who claim dreams and visions from the Lord. Occasionally, people discuss their dreams with me wondering whether such visions are the product of a lousy dinner, or some sort of divine intervention into their subconscious; or whether they are being deluded by the demonic. The answer to that question is found in whether or not the direction of the dream follows God's Word. We remember the Lord's condemnation of the false prophets in Jeremiah's day. In Jeremiah 23:25ff, the Lord says, "I have heard what the prophets say who prophesy lies in my name. They say, 'I had a dream! I had a dream!' How long will this continue in the hearts of these lying prophets, who prophesy the delusions of their own minds?... Let the prophet who had a dream tell his dream, but let the one who has my word speak it faithfully."

If I have a dream which directs me to embezzle church funds, I can be assured this dream is not from God. If my vision encourages me to divorce my wife and buy a red Porsche instead, I can be certain this is not the Lord's direction. But if a dream directs me to share God's Word with a friend or family member, I have to consider the real possibility of the Lord's intervention in my life.

And when we hear the visions or dreams of other modern day "prophets," we let the Bible direct our interpretation. In Jeremiah 28:9, the prophet gives us one clue as to how to discern between prophecy sent by God and prophecy invented by man. "But the prophet who prophesies peace will be recognized as one truly sent by the Lord only if his prediction comes true." In other words, we can only be sure if a prophet is from the Lord if the prophecy proves true. If a prophecy proves false, that prophet is not from the Lord.

If you would like to see a host of false prophets, pick up the next New Year's edition of the National Enquirer. Usually, they have a list of modern "prophecies." You will laugh. I'm still awaiting the day aliens give birth to the newest celebrity's son!

PERSONAL APPLICATION*THE HEAT IS ON – DANIEL 3*

Lord God, we thank You for the witness of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. May we remember Your Word that we, too, may reflect a faith which will not shrink even in the face of death. In Jesus' name. Amen.

1. Look up the following in a dictionary and give definitions.

Satrap:

Magistrate:

Prefect:

In Daniel 3:2, the King gathered many of these individuals and more to dedicate the image constructed by Nebuchadnezzar. Who did these people represent?

How do we know this gathering was multinational and multicultural (3:4)?

How is this description of Babylonian worship imitated in Revelation 7:9–12, 14:6–8?

2. When Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were accused of disobeying the king's edict, what justification did they give? (3:16)

Of whom does this remind you and what circumstance does it echo? (Matthew 27:12–14)

What is the most effective method of persuading others about the truth of our faith? (James 2:14–26)

3. What are Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego's feelings about the Lord's intervention in Daniel 3:17–18?

How does our Lord reflect this same attitude in Luke 22:39–42?

Share with your group the last time you prayed for the Lord's intervention only to find He intervened in a way you never expected.

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4. Describe the manner in which Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were fed to the fire. (3:21)

Why do you think they were clothed in such a fashion?

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5. How does the description of the three Hebrews seem to relate to the ongoing description of evil as described in Revelation 13:11–15?

Can you think of some “idols” Americans are programmed to “worship” as a result of advertising, peer pressure, etc.?

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6. What was Nebuchadnezzar's opinion about the strength of the Hebrew God? (3:15)

Of whom, in our past discussions, does this remind you? (Isaiah 36:13–20)

What evaluation does David, who was a great king, make of such arrogance? (Psalms 2 and 47)

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7. In what manner does Nebuchadnezzar threaten he will execute those who revile the God of the Hebrews? (3:29)

What did Nebuchadnezzar threaten to do to the wise men who were incapable of interpreting his dream? (2:5)

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8. In time, Nebuchadnezzar could no longer resist God's call to follow Him. Describe the last events we know about Nebuchadnezzar's life from verses 4:28–37.

How does this compare to the Pharaoh who also witnessed many of God's powerful miracles?
(Exodus 14:2–4, 21–28)

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9. Which has been your favorite miracle of the Old Testament and why?
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