

BE IT KNOWN TO YOU, O KING

We are not the only ones who have “Memorial Days.” Sometimes we need to tell stories and catch up on our Bible reading. Today I hope to get us immersed a little bit in the Book of Daniel. Some people do not read Daniel much, except for the stories about the Lion’s Den and the Burning Fiery Furnace. They are great stories, and we should all know them. But I hope you go out of here this morning feeling like the Book of Daniel itself is one you are more familiar with and understand. Some books start out seeming pretty straightforward but end up being really complicated. The Book of Daniel sounds complex at first, but it is actually quite straightforward – once you know the code. And the code is the history of the time.

The Book of Daniel acts like it is being written about Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon (605-562 B.C.). But that is only the storyteller’s art – or more accurately, the storyteller’s desire not to be caught and executed. Daniel is actually being written about four hundred years later (168-165 B.C.), just after the desecration of the temple in Jerusalem by Antiochus IV Epiphanes. The writer is using the Nebuchadnezzar setting as a reminder and wake-up call for the crisis the Jews are facing in 168 B.C. Of course, you do not have to agree with this, but if you will come with me into the story’s flow, you will discover it is told with more power and passion than most people realize.

There is a lot of historic detail to get straight, but it’s not really hard to grasp. Babylon had conquered the known world, and in the process she had carried Judaism and most of the Jews of Israel into slavery: hauled them off to Babylon in what was known as the Babylonian Captivity. Subsequently, the Medes conquered the Babylonians, and Darius was their great king. The Persians conquered the Medes, and Cyrus was their most famous leader. Then the Greeks (Macedonians) conquered the Persians – and everyone else in sight – under a young general known as Alexander the Great. The tiny land of Palestine had been walked over, as usual, by all of these armies in turn. Palestine is really just a corridor between Egypt and ... anywhere. The Jews were not conquered so often because people cared about *them*; it’s just that they lived in the corridor. They were never the real object of the campaigns of the major empires; they were just in the way. Do any of you identify?

Alexander died at the age of thirty-three (like a few other famous people we have heard about). His kingdom was divided among his generals. Though there were ten generals, four of them quickly emerged as the major rulers of Alexander's Empire. After a hundred years of Ptolemaic rule (the Egyptian quarter), Palestine fell under the control of the Seleucid Empire (headquartered in Antioch). The Seleucid king at the time was Antiochus IV Epiphanes. The Jews of his time regarded him in approximately the same light as the Jews of our time have regarded Hitler, and for approximately the same reasons. Antiochus decided to destroy Judaism and obliterate the Jews, or at least those who insisted on staying Jewish.

When you get home this afternoon and start reading the Book of Daniel, you will find that apart from the stories of the Lion's Den and the Burning Fiery Furnace, the book is full of weird dreams and visions. Only, now that I have reminded you of the history of the time, they will not seem so weird.

You will come across the king's dream, in which he sees a "great image" (statue). The head is of gold, which stands for the Babylonian Empire. It has breasts and arms of silver, which represents the Medes (great and wealthy, but not as great and wealthy as Babylon). Its belly and thighs are of brass; that is Cyrus and the Persians. Its legs are of iron, referring to Alexander the Great. Iron was the miracle metal of the time, and very precious because it was stronger than any metal previously known. If your sword was made of iron and your opponent still used bronze – guess what? Your sword would cut right through his sword and shield. In this dream, the imagery means that Alexander is invincible. After Alexander's death (323 B.C.), his kingdom is divided among his generals. This is represented by the feet, which are iron mixed with clay. Alexander's generals are strong but compete with each other, and they do not have Alexander's scope or genius. Some people still talk about having "feet of clay." Now you know where that image comes from.

Then a stone not made with human hands breaks the statue and fills the earth like a great mountain. That is God standing behind human history, and God will break the kingdoms of mortals and establish an everlasting kingdom of righteousness and peace. At least that is the great HOPE – the Messianic prophecy. God is biding time but God *will* come, and people must wait and remain faithful, even in the face of severe injustice, trials, and persecutions. We have all heard

that one before. It makes some people give up their faith, and it makes others stronger than ever in their faith. Take your pick. Nevertheless, this is the overriding message of the Book of Daniel.

Now that you have the pattern, the rest comes more easily. Daniel has a dream of four beasts. The lion with the eagle's wings is Babylon. The bear is for the Medes. The leopard is the Persians. The fourth beast, terrible beyond description with iron teeth, is Alexander and his undefeatable armies sweeping across the world.

But this fourth beast has ten horns – Alexander's ten generals – and one terrible *little* horn: Antiochus IV Epiphanes. As mentioned earlier, Antiochus is king of the Seleucid Empire (think Syria; not accurate, but at least it will get you on the map). Antiochus will end up the chief villain in this story, for reasons mentioned earlier and which will become more clear in a moment.

Then comes the HOPE: “[T]here came one like a son of man [It has a familiar ring to it, yes? Jesus' favorite title for Himself.] *And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom ...; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away.*” (Daniel 7:13-14) At the time, of course, they were not thinking of this kingdom as a *spiritual* kingdom.

Next comes the story of the Ram and the He-goat. The Ram is Babylon, its shorter horn being the Medes and its longer horn being the Persians. The He-goat represents the Greeks (Macedonians), the great horn being Alexander the Great. The great horn is broken while the He-goat is still strong, referring to Alexander's early death. Four other horns grow to take its place, meaning the four major generals who divided up Alexander's Empire: Cassander (in Macedonia), Lysimachus (in Asia Minor), Seleucus I (in Syria and Mesopotamia), and Ptolemy I (in Egypt). Then out of one of the four horns (the Seleucid Empire) there grows a *little* horn: Antiochus IV Epiphanes. The little horn will rise up against God and the horn will be broken, but not by human hands – by God.

That is the backdrop and the message of the Book of Daniel: Do not despair. God is still in charge. Things will still work out the way they are supposed to, in the end. But we have to find some way to make it to the end. As I said, there is passion and drama here.

What was actually happening in Palestine at the time was this: The Greeks, like all those in power, believed that their civilization was far superior to anything the world had ever known. Some would still agree with them. Part of their philosophy of government was the belief that their mission was to Hellenize the world. Alexander's dream was to unify and enlighten and bring peace to the whole earth by bringing everyone under the wisdom of the Greek Way. How many of you watch the Olympic Games when they come? See? Hellenization is still at work.

But there are always a few hard-heads who want to spoil the dream: folk who will not cooperate; who insist on hanging on to their own ways and beliefs; who think their own God is best. An inordinate number of these hard-heads, down through history, have been Jewish. Jews had significant dealings with God, and they would not be talked out of their Covenant with Yahweh easily.

Antiochus was a hot-head. The more the Jews resisted his efforts to Hellenize them, the angrier he got. (This is not a story; this is history.) He finally realized, correctly, that unless he broke the Jewish religion, he would never be able to control the people. It is always *religion* that keeps people from total political or social control. Why do you think communism is atheistic? Why do you suppose Christianity takes such issue with humanist perspectives and movements clear down to our own time?

In any case, Antiochus determined to exterminate Judaism. He issued decrees. It became punishable by death to circumcise a son; it was death to the parents, to the son, and to the priest who performed the ceremony. It was death to be caught reading or even in possession of Jewish Scriptures. (If the soldiers came, you would all be slaughtered unceremoniously because there was a Bible in the pew rack in front of you.) It was death to sacrifice to the Jewish God or to meet to worship in Jewish ritual or ceremony. It became a requirement, under penalty of death, to sacrifice and bow down to the Greek gods. This was the real-life threat behind the stories of the Lion's Den and the Burning Fiery Furnace. By the way, Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon never had any such attitude toward the Jews. It was Antiochus, four hundred years later, who instituted this pogrom.

In 168 B.C., Antiochus took his troops into the Jewish temple, tramped into the Holy of Holies, stole everything of value, and then sacrificed a pig on the holy altar. You know, I presume, that pigs have a poor reputation in Judaism. Eating them was forbidden. Sacrificing

a pig on Yahweh's altar was unthinkable. In Judaism, this event was known as "the abomination of desolation." It was beyond words or tears, as indeed Antiochus knew it would be.

The Jews did not have a chance. Their religion was doomed (and therefore so was ours; no Judaism – no Jesus). At the time, the Jews had no armies, no money to raise one, no organization for resistance, no way to get help from anyone anywhere. Once again it seemed like God was dead, God had deserted, or God just did not care. The whole history from Abraham on, it seemed, had just been a sad, fantastic dream without merit or reality. From all appearances, it was over.

But about that time there appeared a little book entitled DANIEL. It started out with a story about a burning fiery furnace, and another about a prophet who was thrown to the lions because he would not stop praying to his God. A simple little book, it seemed, but it said, "Don't give up. The story is not over yet." The people read it and told it and retold it, and they decided that if they could not live in faithfulness, they would *die* in faithfulness – because apart from their God, nothing really mattered anyway.

Here is the historical account from First Maccabees (one of the books in the Apocrypha, which few of you ever read, though I see you carrying it around): *"And the king sent letters by the hand of messengers unto Jerusalem and the cities of Judah, that they should follow laws strange to the land, and should forbid whole burnt-offerings and sacrifices and drink-offerings in the sanctuary; they should profane the Sabbaths and feasts, and pollute the sanctuary and the holy persons; that they should build altars and temples and shrines for idols, and should sacrifice swine's flesh and unclean beasts; and that they should leave their sons uncircumcised, that they should make their souls abominable with all manner of uncleanness and profanation; so that they might forget the law [Torah] and change all the ordinances [of God]. And whosoever shall not do according to the word of the king, he shall die."* (I Maccabees 1:44-50)

The Jewish answer came in the third chapter of Daniel – disguised, but only to the Gentiles. The story of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego is told as if it occurs under Nebuchadnezzar. But it is Nebuchadnezzar alias Antiochus IV Epiphanes. *"Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego answered the king, 'O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter. If it be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace; and he will deliver*

*us out of your hand, O king. But if not [“But if not” is the difference between superstition and faith; the difference between pretense and obedience; the difference between lip service and actual trust in God] ... But if not [even if God does not deliver us], *be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image which you have set up.*”*

One day an emissary from Antiochus arrived with his soldiers in the little village of Modein, just northwest of Jerusalem. They went to force the villagers to bow down and sacrifice to the Greek gods according to the king’s edict. Everyone was quaking with fear and shame. The officers noted one old man – a priest – who seemed to have authority in the village. They called on him to lead the village in complying with the king’s decrees. They offered him silver and gold if he would set a good example, and told him that he and his whole family would be enrolled in the ledgers as special “friends” of the king. The old priest stepped forward and spoke as follows: *“Even if every nation living in the king’s dominion obeys him, each forsaking its ancestral religion to conform to his decrees, I and my sons and my brothers will still follow the covenant of our ancestors. Heaven preserve us from forsaking the law and its observances. As for the king’s orders, we will not follow them. We will not swerve from our own religion either to right or to left.”* (I Maccabees 2:19-22)

Despite this brave speech, one villager lost courage and came forward to the altar of the pagans. But the old priest sprang forward and struck him down with one blow. The king’s commissioner died from the priest’s second blow. Then the villagers ran for the hills. The soldiers were caught by surprise, too dumbfounded to stop them.

That old man’s name was Mattathias, and he had five sons: John, Simon, Judas, Eleazar, and Jonathan. They came to be known as “the Maccabees” – God’s hammers. It was another Robin Hood story, and long before King Richard the Lionheart. The faithful and the persecuted fled to the wilderness to join the Maccabees. They became the most incredible guerrilla fighters the world has ever known. Antiochus sent troops against them, then armies, then larger and larger armies.

The Maccabees fought for thirty years. One by one the brothers were killed, each one stepping into leadership in his turn. If their courage has been equaled, which doubtless it has, yet it has never been surpassed. Ill-equipped, penniless, hungry – held together by faith alone – they fought. They fought in the hills and they fought in

the valleys. They fought the Greek phalanx which had conquered the world. They fought against horsemen, and they fought against armed elephants from India. They fought with the odds 30, then 50, then 100 to 1 against them. They fought until their valleys were knee-deep in blood.

“Be it known to you, O King, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image which you have set up.”

When the Maccabees finally won Jerusalem, their first act was to build a new altar and to purify and rededicate the temple. That event is celebrated to this day as the Feast of Dedication or the Festival of Lights: Hanukkah. It is *not* Jewish Christmas! It is the biblical Fourth of July – or perhaps Memorial Day.

Sometimes people ask me, “Why do you study this stuff?” I do because it is my heritage. I still have an Old Testament in my Bible. I still honor Abraham and King David and Moses and Jeremiah. I know I cannot understand the New Covenant if I do not comprehend the First Covenant. I do not believe we can know what is going on today if we do not know what went on yesterday. How can we serve God or be faithful or call Jesus our Lord and Savior if we do not realize what Jesus is inviting us into – or why?

The United States is not a Christian nation. That is not an insulting comment. It is not even a negative remark. It’s just a fact. The United States is a nation of, by, and for the people – not of, by, and for God. The atheist, the agnostic, the Buddhist, the Muslim, and the home Baptist can be just as American as any Christian. Citizenship in this country is not a matter of religious persuasion. Our forebears made it this way on purpose. And clearly the policies of our country and the people who hold power are not necessarily committed to Christian concepts or belief.

Many of us believe that our political structure is the best the world has ever seen. We want religious liberty, and we want it for *all* people. We believe even our God approves of this. But there is a dichotomy: The *state* works to preserve itself. It believes in freedom, democracy, and the pursuit of happiness. The *church* works for a spiritual kingdom not of this world. Rather than freedom, it believes in discipline and commitment. Rather than democracy, it believes in absolute obedience to a Holy God. Rather than the pursuit of happiness, it seeks a peace that comes in sacrifice, stewardship, dying to self, costly service.

Life in our country is based on a kind of treaty between church and state. The people of the church agree to live as law-abiding citizens within the state. The state agrees not to interfere with our religious obligations and observances. Yet today that treaty is being broken on both sides. Treaties too constantly broken often result in a return to warfare. Let us hope not.

The perilous situation comes from our careless way of dumping church and state together in our minds as a hodgepodge of American sentimentalism. The church expects the state to act with Christian motives. The state expects the church to act with nationalistic pride.

The real fault lies with the Christians. Because we were once such an undisputed majority, we think the state is our friend as *Christians*, not just as citizens. We have allowed ourselves to be enticed away from our faith by the motives and goals and golden images of the state. When things do not go the way we want, we try to blame the state. But the state never promised to be Christian *for us* or even toward us. It only promised to allow *us* to be Christian ourselves, if we wanted to be. If our faith is to survive in this country, it will not be because of the state; it will be because of the church. If Jesus Christ is to be our Lord, it will be because of our faith and devotion – not because any law or influence in our society makes it possible.

We have wanted all things to be in our favor. We have wanted to be nice and popular and approved of by our society. We have wanted all the benefits of a secular society, and few of the disciplines of the Christian Way of Life. But the pagan king's decree still goes out over the land. And the decree is this:

That recreation and pleasure shall be more important than the community of Christ's servants. We shall attend sports and games and not our worship services.

That we must live to get and keep ourselves rich.

That we must compromise our morals and our honor for security and success.

That we will no longer keep the vows of marriage sacred.

That we will no longer seek our vocations under God.

BE IT KNOWN TO YOU, O KING

That we will no longer teach our children the heritage and traditions of our Faith if it conflicts with the social life and opportunities of the society around us.

That we will no longer keep the traditions ourselves, if they become inconvenient.

That we shall give a mere pittance of the time, money, energy, and devotion that the Christian WAY of Life requires.

There is an answer. Not all desire or intend to give it. But there is an answer: *“Be it known to you, O King, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image which you have set up.”*