

The Rise and Fall of the World, Part 1

Scripture: Daniel 2:31–40

Code: 27-07

INTRODUCTION

A. The Downfall of Governments

The eventual decline of the United States isn't something that should shock us. All nations go the way of all flesh, ending in collapse and ruin. Anything established on the wisdom and power of man will suffer the same kind of deterioration man himself has suffered since the Fall. Dissipation is man's history--

man is not ascending; he is descending. History reveals a succession of defeats. Empires begin, reach a peak, fade, and then die as another is built out of its ashes. America is deteriorating just as every other nation has in the past. Our nation has feet of clay like the image in Nebuchadnezzar's dream (Dan. 2:33).

B. The Dominion of the Gentiles

The world is a vast stage with the curtain still down. The actors are behind the curtain preparing for the last scene in the drama of human history. That final scene takes place in the latter days, and it is the return of the Lord Jesus Christ. The book of Daniel takes us behind that curtain before it rises and give us insight into the unfolding of the last act of human history.

1. Its duration

Daniel 2:31-45 presents the history of the world under Gentile rule. Jesus said this about it: "Jerusalem shall be trodden down by the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles be fulfilled" (Luke 21:24). Those times began with the Babylonian Captivity and will end with the second coming of Christ. We are living in that time period right now. Israel does not possess the fullness of its inheritance as promised in the Abrahamic or Palestinian Covenants (Gen. 15:18; Deut. 30:1-9). Nor does it dwell in peace. Gentile nations have dominated that part of the world since Nebuchadnezzar, and will continue to do so to some degree until Jesus comes again.

Daniel 2 reveals how God transferred the leadership of the earth from the Jewish nation of Israel to the Gentiles. Israel was to be God's messenger to the world, but Israel tragically failed and will not return to its former glory until Jesus returns.

2. Its backdrop

As we come to the book of Daniel, Israel has been taken into captivity. Daniel himself is a captive, but because of his unique capabilities, he has been elevated to serve in the court of King

Nebuchadnezzar as an assistant in Jewish affairs. It is in that important position that he received the prophecy of Gentile domination through the dream of Nebuchadnezzar.

Comfort for the Israelites

Why did God give a prophecy about Gentile domination at the very time that the domination began? Because the nation of Judah had recently been taken into captivity by Gentiles and God wanted the people to know it wouldn't be a permanent situation. If the Israelites came to believe there was no hope for them as a nation, they would have questioned God's credibility. He had said He would maintain His people and would always keep His covenant with them (2 Sam. 7:16). And He has!

At the time the prophecy was given Jerusalem was in ruins and the Temple had been torn down. Its sacred vessels had been carried off and placed in the temple of an idol. God's glory had departed from the people (Ezek. 11:22-23). The children of Israel stood weeping on the banks of Babylon without a song in their hearts (Ps. 137:1-4). In this saddened state they wanted to know if God had forsaken them forever and forgotten His covenant. The prophecy of Daniel 2 gives a resounding no.

Before we look at God's revelation through the dream, we need to review Daniel 2:1-30.

LESSON

I. THE DREAM RECEIVED (vv. 1-30)

Nebuchadnezzar, a pagan king who didn't believe in the God of Israel, was lying on his bed one night trying to sleep when he began to think about what would happen to his empire when he died (v. 29). Aware that other empires had come and gone, he fell asleep and dreamed a special dream given him by God: a panorama of history from his reign until the return of Jesus Christ. That's "the times of the Gentiles" Jesus referred to (Luke 21:24).

A. The Consummation of History

Daniel 2:28 frames the dream: "There is a God in heaven who revealeth secrets, and maketh known to the king, Nebuchadnezzar, what shall be in the latter days." The key phrase, "the latter days," is not restricted to Nebuchadnezzar's lifetime. It is an eschatological term in Old Testament prophetic writings referring to God's future dealings with mankind, consummated in the kingdom of Messiah (e.g., Gen. 49:1; Num. 24:14; Deut. 4:30; 31:29; Jer. 23:20; 30:24; 48:47; 49:39; Ezek. 38:16; Dan. 10:14; Hos. 3:5; Mic. 4:1). The Greek term translated "the last days" is used the same way in the New Testament (e.g., Acts 2:17-21; 2 Pet. 3:3-4).

B. The Succession of History

In verses 28-29 Daniel says, "Thy dream, and the visions of thy head upon thy bed are these: As for

thee, O king, thy thoughts came into thy mind upon thy bed, what should come to pass hereafter; and he who revealeth secrets maketh known to thee what shall come to pass" (emphasis added). "What shall come to pass" indicates that Nebuchadnezzar was to learn about a succession of events in history leading to the latter days.

We have seen that although Nebuchadnezzar had the dream, he forgot it (see pp. xx-xx). God allowed him to forget it to expose the wise men as phonies and give Daniel an opportunity to answer the king's request. Daniel became the channel of God's revelation.

II. THE DREAM RECALLED (vv. 31-35)

Since the king had forgotten his dream, Daniel first had to recount it before he could interpret it: "Thou, O king, sawest, and behold a great image [statue]. This great image, whose brightness was excellent, stood before thee, and the form of it was terrible. This image's head was of fine gold, its breast and its arms of silver, its belly and its thighs of bronze, its legs of iron, its feet part of iron and part of clay. Thou sawest until a stone was cut out without hands, which smote the image upon its feet that were of iron and clay, and broke them to pieces. Then were the iron, the clay, the bronze, the silver, and the gold, broken to pieces together, and became like the chaff of the summer threshing floors; and the wind carried them away, that no place was found for them; and the stone that smote the image became a great mountain, and filled the whole earth" (Dan. 2:31-35).

A. The Description of the Statue (vv. 31-33)

Daniel saw a shining metal statue in human form.

1. Its general appearance (v. 31)

a) Massive

The Aramaic term translated "great image" means "immense" or "massive."

b) Brilliant

That its "brightness was excellent" tells us the metal in it shined brilliantly.

c) Awesome

This statue was "terrible"--it inspired fear. We would say it was awesome. It was so immense that the king was scared to death. Even though he couldn't remember his dream, he could remember that it scared him.

2. Its specific elements (vv. 32-33)

a) Deteriorating worth

The statue was made of different elements. It started with gold at the top and deteriorated in value to iron and clay at the bottom. The clay (Aram., *hasap*, "baked clay") was most likely a brittle ceramic tile.

b) Decreasing weights

There also is a corresponding lower specific gravity for each element: gold is heavier than silver, silver is heavier than brass, brass is heavier than iron, and iron is heavier than iron and clay combined. The specific gravities of those metals are 19, 11, 8.5, and 7.8 respectively. The gold

caused the top of the statue to be more than twice as heavy as the bottom--the statue was top-heavy. Combined with the brittleness of the bottom of the statue, we learn that the Gentile world until the return of Christ is balanced precariously and in a constant process of deterioration until it is smashed and blown away like dust in the wind.

B. The Destruction of the Statue (vv. 34-35)

Daniel 2:34-35 says, "A stone was cut out without hands [it had no human source], which smote the image upon its feet that were of iron and clay, and broke them to pieces. Then were the iron, the clay, the bronze, the silver, and the gold, broken to pieces together, and became like the chaff of the summer threshing floors; and the wind carried them away, that no place was found for them; and the stone that smote the image became a great mountain, and filled the whole earth." The stone takes over the world as the top-heavy image is toppled by a crushing blow at its feet. In rapid succession the image disintegrates and all its dust is blown away.

III. THE DREAM REVEALED (vv. 36-45)

Having recalled the dream, Daniel proceeded to interpret it: "This is the dream, and we will tell its interpretation before the king" (v. 36). Nebuchadnezzar never agreed or disagreed with Daniel in the recounting of his dream. I think he was left speechless--he knew Daniel was accurate, which is why he promoted Daniel to prime minister of Babylon (v. 48).

Daniel didn't interpret the king's dream single-handedly, as verse 36 implies: "We will tell its interpretation" (emphasis added). Some claim that "we" refers to Daniel and his three friends, others to Daniel and God. I think it refers to both God and Daniel's three friends--they were all involved.

In the interpretation of the dream, Daniel identified four kingdoms: "Thou, O king, art a king of kings; for the God of heaven hath given thee a kingdom, power, and strength, and glory. And wherever the children of men dwell, the beasts of the field and the fowls of the heavens hath he given into thine hand, and hath made thee ruler over them all. Thou art this head of gold. And after thee shall arise another kingdom inferior to thee, and another third kingdom of bronze, which shall bear rule over all the earth. And the fourth kingdom shall be strong as iron, forasmuch as iron breaketh in pieces and subdueth all things; and, as iron that breaketh all these, it shall break in pieces and bruise. And whereas thou sawest the feet and toes, part of potters' clay and part of iron, the kingdom shall be divided; but there shall be in it of the strength of the iron, forasmuch as thou sawest the iron mixed with the miry clay. And as the toes of the feet were part of iron and part of clay, so the kingdom shall be partly strong and partly broken. And whereas thou sawest iron mixed with miry clay, they shall mingle themselves with the seed of men; but they shall not adhere one to another, even as iron is not mixed with clay" (vv. 37-43).

The image represents four world empires in succeeding stages from Nebuchadnezzar to Jesus Christ.

A. Babylon (vv. 37-38)

"Thou, O king, art a king of kings; for the God of heaven hath given thee a kingdom, power, and

strength, and glory. And wherever the children of men dwell, the beasts of the field and the fowls of the heavens hath he given into thine hand, and hath made thee ruler over them all. Thou art this head of gold."

1. Its rule

Nebuchadnezzar is addressed in verse 37 as "a king of kings"--a title given him by God, who also had given him "a kingdom, power, and strength, and glory." The New Testament confirms that God establishes governments.

a) Romans 13:1--"There is no power but of God; the powers that be are ordained of God."

b) Acts 17:26--God has "determined the times before appointed, and the bounds of their [nations] habitation."

God established Nebuchadnezzar as a supreme monarch. Ezekiel also referred to him as "a king of kings" (Ezek. 26:7). Although Nebuchadnezzar reigned for forty-three years, his kingdom lasted about seventy years. That was also the duration of God's chastening of Israel in the Babylonian Captivity before He allowed the people to return to their land (Jer. 27:6-8; 2 Chron. 36:20-21). God raised up Nebuchadnezzar as His chastening agent. Once Israel's chastening was complete, Nebuchadnezzar's kingdom passed out of existence (Jer. 25:12).

2. Its realm

Nebuchadnezzar's kingdom spread over the most civilized portion of the world in his day--from Egypt and Israel to the Persian Gulf. That his realm encompassed the beasts and the birds (v. 38) is simply a hyperbole to show the extent of his authority. Nebuchadnezzar had gone beyond the leaders of his time in power and authority. Of the four world empires, no monarch is mentioned after him, only kingdoms. His was the only absolute monarchy; the remaining parts of the image indicate a change in the way rule was rendered. Commentator Leon Wood said, "Nebuchadnezzar was uniquely responsible for [Babylon's] attaining and maintaining empire status. After him, its power diminished rapidly. It was far more his kingdom, than he was its king. The same was not true of any ruler of the succeeding empires" (A Commentary on Daniel [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973], p. 67).

Daniel identified Nebuchadnezzar as a "head of gold" (v. 38). Gold was a highly valued metal in the Babylonian Empire. The ancient historian Herodotus visited Babylon about seventy years after the empire fell yet still was able to report that he never had seen such proliferation of gold as what he saw in Babylon. He described temple idols, vessels, and other accoutrements made of "more than twenty-two tons of gold" (The Histories 1:180-85).

B. Medo-Persia (v. 39a)

"And after thee shall arise another kingdom inferior to thee."

According to verse 32, the second kingdom was represented by the statue's chest and arms of silver, an implication that this kingdom wouldn't have the solidarity of the head. It was a two-fold division instead. That can refer only to the Medo-Persian Empire, made up of the Median and Persian peoples, who supplanted the Babylonian Empire.

1. Its succession

The Aramaic word translated "inferior" literally means "lower." Rather than referring to the second kingdom as inferior qualitatively, I think Daniel was saying that the chest and the arms were lower on the statue, meaning that the kingdom of silver would follow the one of gold. It's not a commentary on the quality or size of the kingdom because the last three empires were progressively larger than the previous ones: Medo- Persia was larger than Babylon, Greece was larger than Medo- Persia, and Rome was larger than Greece. And each was stronger than the one before.

Note that verse 39 refers to the second kingdom without saying anything about it. Of the four kingdoms, this is the only one Daniel said nothing about. Whereas the next one would "bear rule over all the earth," no specifics are given concerning the second one. I believe Daniel's reason was to alleviate Nebuchadnezzar's concern about what kingdom would topple his empire.

2. Its silver

One characteristic of the Medo-Persian Empire was silver, or money. The Medo-Persian Empire developed a vast system of taxation that required taxes to be paid in silver (Herodotus, The Histories 3:90-97). Xerxes I, who inherited the incredible fortune of his father, Darius I, as well as from other Persian kings, used it to finance the massive Persian Wars against the Greeks.

Following the Babylonian Empire, the Medo-Persian Empire was established in 538 B.C. under Cyrus the Great. It lasted about two hundred years until 330 B.C.

C. Greece (v. 39b)

"Another third kingdom of bronze, which shall bear rule over all the earth."

Verse 32 says this kingdom was represented by the statue's belly and thighs of bronze. Following the Medo-Persian Empire came the Greek Empire under Alexander the Great, who initially received power and authority from his father, Philip of Macedon.

1. Its apportionment

After Alexander died, the empire was divided among his four generals but ultimately it had a twofold division between the Seleucids in Syria and the Ptolemies in Egypt.

2. Its army

Daniel characterized the Greek kingdom as bronze, apparently because of its army. Commentator W.A. Criswell said, "It is easy to imagine what an astonishing impression the Greeks must have made on the civilized world. Consider the contrast between their soldiers and the soldiers of the Persian Army. Had you seen a soldier of Media or of Persia in the days when they controlled the civilized world, he would have looked like this: On his head would have been a soft, turban-like covering. He would have been clothed with a tunic with sleeves and with trousers full and long. That would have been the Medo-Persian soldier. But when you saw a Greek soldier he would have had on his head a helmet of brass and on his body a breastplate of brass and before him he would be

carrying a shield of brass and a sword of brass. That is why the classic writers of ancient days will refer to the 'brazen coated Greeks.' Brass became a sign and a symbol of Greek conquest and of the Greek empire" (Expository Sermons on the Book of Daniel [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976], p. 64). Gold represented Babylon because Babylon was preoccupied with gold. Silver represented Medo-Persia because the Medes and Persians were preoccupied with silver. And brass represented the Greeks because it symbolized the forces of Alexander the Great.

3. Its authority

Verse 39 says that the third kingdom would "bear rule over all the earth." Indeed Alexander the Great conquered Egypt, part of Europe, and most of the land from Asia Minor to India-- practically the entire known world--before he died in his thirties.

D. Rome (vv. 40-43)

1. Reviewed from the past (v. 40)

We know the legs of iron (v. 32) refer to the Roman Empire because it subdued what remained of the Greek Empire and was uniquely strong. It established itself as a world power during the first century B.C. and extended even further than Alexander's conquests. The two legs of the statue indicate the natural division between the eastern and western ends of the empire.

a) Its duration (v. 40a)

"The fourth kingdom shall be strong as iron."

In Daniel's day, iron was the strongest metal known. Without question the Roman Empire is the strongest empire the world has ever known. Whereas the Babylonian Empire lasted seventy years and those of Medo-Persia and Greece not much longer than two hundred years, the Roman Empire lasted over five hundred years in the West and until A.D. 1453 in the East. No empire has ever come as close to its strength and endurance.

b) Its destructiveness (v. 40b)

"Forasmuch as iron breaketh into pieces and subdueth all things; and, as iron that breaketh all these, shall it break in pieces and bruise."

All those terms refer to the shattering power of Rome. The Aramaic verb translated "breaketh" means "to crush with a hammer." H.C. Leupold said, "The Roman legions were noted for their ability to crush all resistance with an iron heel. There is apparently little that is constructive in the program of this empire in spite of Roman law and Roman roads and civilization, because the destructive work outweighed all else, for we have the double verb 'crush and demolish'" (Exposition of Daniel [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1969], p. 119).

The Romans lasted so long because they ruled with an iron rod. The strong iron legions of Rome represented the final world power indicated by the image.

2. Revived in the future

There is more to the prophecy: the feet of iron mixed with clay (v. 33). I believe the feet reveal that we will see a return to power of the ancient Roman Empire. Already the timetable has been set for the twelve nations of the European Community, much of whose territory was originally part of the original Roman Empire, to dissolve their economic borders by December 31, 1992 (see the series of articles in the national news magazine Insight [20 June 1988]: 8-17).

The Los Angeles Herald-Examiner reported back in October 29, 1971 that "the British decision to join

the Common Market brought Western Europe to the threshold of its strongest union since the nations involved were tied together as part of the Roman Empire's centuries ago" ("Britain's Entry in Market a Step to United Europe," section A page 4). Commentator Robert Culver wrote, "Two millennia ago, Rome gave the world the ecumenical unity that the League of Nations and the United Nations organizations have sought to revive in our time.... [They are] revivals of the ancient Roman ideal that never, since the time of Augustus Caesar, has been wholly lost. It is probable that the Pax Romana (Roman peace), the peace of a well-ordered prison with plenty of iron gates, steel doors, trained guards, and high walls, is the best the world will ever achieve till Jesus comes" (Daniel and the Latter Days [Chicago: Moody, 1977], p. 125).

CONCLUSION

The history of the world is reaching its climax. Can America survive? We are succumbing already to the deadly, inevitable deterioration of man. We are a selfish people, and our selfishness will result in self-destruction. Should Jesus tarry, someone else will rise from our ashes and start the cycle all over again.

Focusing on the Facts

1. Why shouldn't the gradual downfall of the United States shock us?
2. What great period of world history do we see in Daniel 2? What is Israel's basic relationship to that period? Identify the beginning and ending of that period.
3. What enabled Daniel to be elevated to a unique place of authority in Babylon?
4. What does the phrase "the latter days" refer to?
5. According to Daniel 2:28-29 what would Nebuchadnezzar learn from his dream?
6. What about the general appearance of the statue made it a cause for fear?
7. What do the decreasing densities of the materials in the statue imply about the Gentile world?
8. What does the image in Nebuchadnezzar's dream represent?
9. According to verse 37, how did Nebuchadnezzar become "a king of kings"?
10. Why did God raise up Nebuchadnezzar? What is the significance between the duration of the Babylonian Empire and the captivity of Israel?

11. What is the significance of Nebuchadnezzar's ruling over "the beasts of the field and the fowls of the heavens" (Dan. 2:38)?
12. How did the gold head relate to Babylon?
13. Why were no specifics given to Nebuchadnezzar regarding the kingdom that would follow him?
14. Why was Greece characterized as the empire of bronze?
15. Under what ruler did Greece "bear rule over all the earth" (Dan. 2:39)?
16. Name a quality of iron that was also characteristic of the Roman Empire.
17. What organization today can be described as a revival of the ancient Roman Empire?

Pondering the Principles

1. How would you have felt if you had been taken into captivity after the destruction of Jerusalem? What effect would prophecies about a glorious future for Israel have had on you in such a situation? Read the following verses and identify the attribute of God that they display: Exodus 6:4-5; Deuteronomy 7:8-9; Joshua 23:14; Psalm 9:10; 111:5-9; Jeremiah 29:10; 33:14, 20-21. What hope could you share with a Jewish friend to direct his attention to God and to Jesus Christ, the Messiah? Make Psalm 89:1 a reality in your life this week.

2. What part can you play in redirecting the deteriorating course our country is on? Answer these questions: Do you vote? Do you take time to understand the issues and candidates you vote for? Have you ever corresponded with any political representatives? Do you ever pray for them and other influential leaders (1 Tim. 2:1-4)? Do you ever interact with unbelievers and share Scripture with them? Should you be involved on a community team or committee that might benefit from your biblical perspectives? Make the commitment not to be one of the many who say, "Someone else will do it. I'm too busy."

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