

The Writing on the Wall



Quiet Time and Devotional Series

The Fox Valley Church

The Writing on the Wall

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Did Santa Claus Do It? - Day 1

Daniel 1:1-2

¹ In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it. ² And the Lord delivered Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand, along with some of the articles from the temple of God. These he carried off to the temple of his god in Babylonia^[a] and put in the treasure house of his god.

I'm always amazed by the spectacle every year at Christmas time of young children running around worrying about what Santa thinks of them, whether or not they will get presents from Santa, and just what exactly those presents will be. The irony in all of that is that millions of children ascribe things to Santa that he is not responsible for. Santa gets all of the credit but little do they know that it is really their parents who make Christmas happen.

- Most people believe that believing in Santa Claus is harmless and that may be true, but what are some of the possible negative side effects of believing that one person is responsible for something when they are not?
- Have you ever done something nice for someone or worked really hard on something only to have someone else get or even take credit for it?
- How did that make you feel at the time?
- Why do you think it is important that people get proper credit for their work?
- Read Acts 3:10-16
- What was the immediate response of Peter and John when the people wanted to give them credit for the healing?

In these opening verses of the book of Daniel, the primary theme of the book is brought to the forefront. Perhaps surprisingly for some, is that no mention is made of Daniel or his three friends that were brought to Babylon. That is because their exile in Babylon, although important is not the primary theme. The primary focus in Daniel has to do with the bringing of some of the articles of the Temple in Jerusalem to Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar had thought that he, with the help of the Babylonian gods, was responsible for the conquest of Jerusalem and the seizure of the treasures of the Temple. What he will soon discover, however, is that he was dead wrong. Like a small child that still believes in Santa, Nebuchadnezzar was missing who was really responsible for what was going on around him. It wasn't his doing, it wasn't the gods of Babylon, and it certainly wasn't Santa Claus. It was the very God that he thought he had defeated that was firmly in control of all events.

- Verse 2 actually specifically reads, "The God's house" in the original language. Why would Daniel use that particular phrase rather than just "God's house" (as it appears in the NIV) or even "Yahweh's house"?

- How does the phrase “The God’s house” play into Daniel’s theme that Yahweh is the sovereign God of the whole world?
- What are some of the primary ways that people in our world today declare, by their practices, that they are the true lords of their own lives and societies rather than God?
- What are some of the primary ways that you do this in your own life?
- Do you truly give credit to God for everything in your life or do you subtly find yourself seeking or taking credit for the things that he has done?
- Read Psalm 59:9-17
- What does this passage remind us about recognizing the power of God in every situation and not thinking that we are responsible for things?

Nebuchadnezzar had made the classic mistake of humanity, a group that was made in the image of God. He became exceedingly arrogant; thinking that he was “running things” rather than the one, true God. Nebuchadnezzar thought of himself as the master of fate and believed that he had defeated Judah and taken the items from the Temple, including the best of the young men. He had believed himself to be greater than God so when he defeated the people of Yahweh, the people of Judah, and sacked the Temple, his own self-deceived notions were seemingly verified. Jerusalem’s treasure would be placed in the house of Nebuchadnezzar’s gods, proving that he was the one with sovereign power over the universe. The primary theme of the remainder of the book of Daniel is a clear demonstration to Nebuchadnezzar and anyone else who cared to pay attention, that the only true God who is sovereign over the events of history and indeed the entire world is Yahweh, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

- Why is it so important to consider God’s sovereignty on a daily basis?
- The people of Israel went through an exceedingly difficult time in order to learn a lesson of the importance of recognizing God’s sovereignty. Take a few moments today to think about or jot down a few times in your own life when you have had to go through difficult times and struggles. How did you learn to grow and recognize God in those times?

Time to Ponder

- Read and meditate on James 4:13-17 today.
- Write out one way that this passage challenges you as read it today.
- Write down one conviction that you can either make or renew in your life based on this study.

A New Name - Day 2

Daniel 1:3-7

³ Then the king ordered Ashpenaz, chief of his court officials, to bring into the king's service some of the Israelites from the royal family and the nobility— ⁴ young men without any physical defect, handsome, showing aptitude for every kind of learning, well informed, quick to understand, and qualified to serve in the king's palace. He was to teach them the language and literature of the Babylonians.^[b] ⁵ The king assigned them a daily amount of food and wine from the king's table. They were to be trained for three years, and after that they were to enter the king's service.

⁶ Among those who were chosen were some from Judah: Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah. ⁷ The chief official gave them new names: to Daniel, the name Belteshazzar; to Hananiah, Shadrach; to Mishael, Meshach; and to Azariah, Abednego.

One of the toughest things about taking a new job is often learning the culture of the place. Learning the job itself is one thing, but it is often just as difficult to unlearn how “things were done” at your old job and embrace an entirely new way of “doing things.” Unlearning old habits and practices can be a far more daunting and difficult thing than someone might first suspect.

But for the young, that same process is not nearly as difficult. In the 17th century in America and Canada it was not entirely uncommon for children of European settlements to be kidnapped and taken to live with Native American cultures. To my amazement, it was generally reported that within a year or so, the children had completely conformed to their new Native culture and usually even completely lost the ability to speak in the French or English language that they were reared in. The children were rather moldable to their new culture quite quickly.

- Have you ever entered into a new situation (job, family, church, or even a new country) and found a new culture that you were unfamiliar with?
- What was most difficult about that situation?
- How did you feel, after a while, about your previous situation? Did you begin to appreciate your old culture more and cling to it or did you quickly embrace the new one and discard the old?

As Nebuchadnezzar brought these young Jewish boys (they were probably in their pre-teen to teen years) into the Babylonian courts, everything that they experienced would have been designed to get them to be impressed with their new situation and culture and to abandon their old ways of thinking and doing things. The Babylonians intentionally took young men who they thought would be moldable to their new culture and they tried to woo them with the finest foods and aspects of Babylonian culture so that they would be duly impressed. The overall intention of the Babylonians was to get these young men to forget about their homeland, their ways, and their belief in the God of Israel.

Their days were filled with fine foods and learning. They were shown the great and mighty impressive achievements of the Babylonian culture. They were quickly immersed in Babylonian art, literature, culture, politics, history, religion, and the language of the Babylonians. The intent was that this would all be terribly impressive, coupled with the fact that Babylon's recent defeat of Israel would have proven in the minds of most people of the ancient world that Babylon's gods were sovereign over Israel's God.

After three years under the tutelage and care of Asphenaz, the young men would have been thoroughly conformed to their new culture and have left their inferior beliefs and practices long behind them. At every waking turn, they were being pressed into a new Babylonian mold so that they would lose their Jewish "shape" as quickly as possible.

- What do you think would be the most challenging about this situation that Daniel and the other young men found themselves in?
- How hard would it have been to cling to their old culture and beliefs?
- What would have been working against them, convincing them that there was no reason to cling to those beliefs?
- In what ways do you find yourself being tempted to conform to a pattern or culture other than the one that God calls you to?
- What do you find the most challenging about not conforming to that way of thinking or acting?

To solidify all of this in the minds of these young men, their names were changed. Each of their Hebrew names contained forms of the name of the God, either "El" (which simply meant "God") or "Yah" (which was short for the personal name of God, "Yahweh"). These names would have reminded them who they served and who had the power over their lives. But their new names contained the names of the Babylonian gods Aku and Nego. Here they were deported into a new and strange land, stripped of everything they knew, and even stripped them of their names that would have reminded them to remain faithful to the Lord. They were being told in every way that they were now the servants of the Babylonian gods. Their culture, their language, and even their gods were superior. All they needed to do now was to abandon their old ways and embrace this new and superior way of life. Perhaps it is striking that of all the young men brought to Babylon, only these four are mentioned specifically. That would seem to indicate that the Babylonian system had worked to influence and change all of the other young men. But the Lord would find four faithful servants who would not forget him.

- What pressures do you face on a daily basis to conform to a worldly pattern or beliefs rather than Christian ones?
- What is your response when faced with these challenges?
- What is the ultimate importance of not conforming to the pattern of the world? Why does it matter?

Time to Ponder

- Read and meditate on Romans 12:1-2.
- Write out one way that this passage challenges you as read it today.
- Write down one conviction that you can either make or renew in your life based on this study.

Cooking the Frog - Day 3

Daniel 1:8-14

⁸ But Daniel resolved not to defile himself with the royal food and wine, and he asked the chief official for permission not to defile himself this way. ⁹ Now God had caused the official to show favor and compassion to Daniel, ¹⁰ but the official told Daniel, "I am afraid of my lord the king, who has assigned your^l food and drink. Why should he see you looking worse than the other young men your age? The king would then have my head because of you."

¹¹ Daniel then said to the guard whom the chief official had appointed over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah, ¹² "Please test your servants for ten days: Give us nothing but vegetables to eat and water to drink. ¹³ Then compare our appearance with that of the young men who eat the royal food, and treat your servants in accordance with what you see." ¹⁴ So he agreed to this and tested them for ten days.

I cannot say for certain whether it is true or not, but I have heard many times that there is a specific technique in cooking a frog. Evidently it is a common practice to boil a frog while it is still alive. A practice, which incidentally, I think is horrible. But the point is that if you put a frog in a boiling pot of water it will immediately jump out. But if you put it in a pot of room temperature water and slowly turn the heat up in increments, the frog will get used to the warming temperatures and stay in the water. He will stay in that water even as it is turned all the way up to boiling and he eventually dies. It has often been used as a picture of what happens when we slowly get used to changing but ultimately dangerous conditions just a little at a time.

We often get used to those changing conditions through compromise. Compromise, in this context, is to simply make small little adjustments in our convictions. Oh, we would rarely jump in and completely abandon God and our faith but it is quite common to see someone make small compromises in their faith and practices and before you know it, a true life of holiness is an extremely small object in their rear-view mirror.

- Have you ever been tempted to compromise small little things about your faith or your walk in the Christian life?
- What are some of the things that can push or pull us towards compromise?
- Why can small steps of compromise be so dangerous in the long run?

Nebuchadnezzar took the young men that he did from Judah because they were the best and brightest of Israel, God's garden, and he saw that they were good and wanted them for his own. He immediately set about to turn their loyalties away from God and their homeland to him and the gods of Babylon. One of the chief ways that he did this was through the enticement of incredible food and drink that may have been the best that the world had to offer back then.

It may not seem like such a big deal to simply eat the king's food. But Daniel and the others knew better. They knew that the food was not the issue. The real issue for them

was that this choice food, including incredible cuts of meat, would have indicated that they were reliant upon the King for provision. To eat that food would have, in their minds, been a small act of compromise in their commitment to being holy before the one, true God. In addition, it could easily have led them to begin to become comfortable with the ways of the Babylonians. It was just a small little thing but they understood that there are no small things when it comes to being faithful to God.

- What do you think of the decision of Daniel and the others to not participate in eating the king's food? Why would they have made such a decision?
- What do you think would have been challenging about taking such a position and sticking to it?
- Do you feel like it would have mattered if they had just eaten the food but still determined to remain faithful to God?
- Read 2 Kings 16:10-14
- Why do you think that King Ahaz decided to copy the pagan altar and have it moved into the Temple?
- What did he do with the Lord's altar when he moved in the pagan one?
- Are you ever tempted to move the things of God in your life, even just a little, to make room for something that seems more impressive?

Daniel refused to defile himself with the royal food and wine and took what must have been a great stand of courage in asking that he not be forced to eat the king's food. Daniel could have become paralyzed with fear of what might happen if he took such a step, but the text makes clear that God was with him. When Daniel stepped out in faith in God, God was there to soften the heart of the official to be favorable towards him. God's people will find that God does not call his children to action without giving them the necessary provisions to carry out those actions.

Daniel was committed to doing things God's way but the royal officials were so convinced of their own way that they were sure that Daniel and the others would suffer if they didn't do things the Babylonian way. Daniel would not waver, however. He would eat only vegetables that had not been sacrificed to Babylonian gods and was sure that God would provide. Daniel and the others would walk by faith in God's way and not make even the smallest of compromises. There is much for us to learn from them.

- What is your response when faced with little calls to compromise small things in your walk with God?
- What can you learn from the example of Daniel and the others here?

Time to Ponder

- Read and meditate on Ephesians 4:17-32.
- Write out one way that this passage challenges you as read it today.
- Write down one conviction that you can either make or renew in your life based on this study.

I Won't Eat That - Day 4

Daniel 1:11-16

¹¹ Daniel then said to the guard whom the chief official had appointed over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah, ¹² "Please test your servants for ten days: Give us nothing but vegetables to eat and water to drink. ¹³ Then compare our appearance with that of the young men who eat the royal food, and treat your servants in accordance with what you see." ¹⁴ So he agreed to this and tested them for ten days.

¹⁵ At the end of the ten days they looked healthier and better nourished than any of the young men who ate the royal food. ¹⁶ So the guard took away their choice food and the wine they were to drink and gave them vegetables instead.

I once knew a young person who had a difficult decision to make. They came from a rather challenging economic home environment and lived in a pretty poor neighborhood but they had worked hard through high school and had been rather successful. This student was bright and talented and could have really gone places but college seemed like an almost insurmountable obstacle because of the expense of going to a university. Then an opportunity was placed in front of them. A family member of this student offered to pay their way through college. This might seem all good but it created a great dilemma for this student because they knew that this family member's money had come from illegal drug dealing. To accept the money would have been to certify that lifestyle and always know that they were dependent upon it. The student chose to reject the offer and through great difficulty made their way through school on their own.

We don't usually have choices to make that are as dramatic as the one my former student had or the ones that Daniel and his friends had to make, but we are constantly faced the choice between taking the easy road or truly relying upon God.

- Read Psalm 37:1-4
- What does it say regarding our attitude towards those that might have an upper hand or seem to get ahead by doing wrong?
- What is the promise for those that trust in the Lord? (Note that the promise has to do with God giving desires in the heart, not granting us wishes)
- Have you any difficult choices to make lately between trusting in God's way or taking an easier road and relying on someone or something else other than God to provide? How do you determine what to choose?

Certainly Daniel and the others did not want to eat meat that was sacrificed to pagan gods (as we saw yesterday), but there was much more to their refusal to eat from the king's table. They did not want anyone, including themselves, to begin to think that they relied on the king for their provision. Eating the king's food early on would be a symbol that they were subservient to the king. They didn't want to send that message or begin to think it themselves. Instead they would eat nothing but vegetables and water and rely on God's provision. The point of this passage is not to extol the virtues of a certain diet but to point out that in this particular context, the young men were going to great

lengths to show that they relied on God alone. They were sending the clear message that they belonged to God and not the king.

Normally this act of rebellion would have been dealt with harshly, but God blessed their devotion and provided for them by moving the heart of the official to allow them to take such actions and by sustaining them and causing them to look healthier after the period of testing (whether this was miraculous or the natural result of rejecting the world's way and simply eating a "healthier" diet is up for debate but does not change the point that it was God that was providing.)

- Why do you think that Daniel and the others refused the king's food?
- Why was eating a different diet so important to their survival in Babylon as servants of God?
- Read Genesis 14:17-24
- Why did Abraham refuse the spoils of war that would have rightfully been his?

It would have been so easy for Daniel and the others to just go along with what everyone else was doing. After all, who would have questioned the mere act of relying on the king for their provision to eat and drink? But Daniel took the road of no compromise and holiness. They would carefully rely on the Lord alone to provide.

In the end, God did provide to the extent that it became apparent to all that God's way was the best way. Everyone was switched over to Daniel's diet and without even realizing it, the others were learning that God was the true provider and sustainer, not the king.

It can be so easy for us to make small compromises and not be committed to relying on God's provision regardless of the cost. When we do so, however, we lose the chance that Daniel took here to demonstrate to those around him that rejecting the provision of anything other than God is always the best, although often not the easiest way.

- Are there any situations right now going on in your life that come to mind as we study out these passages in which you have made small compromises in your holiness?
- What can you learn from the resolve of Daniel to rely on God alone?

Time to Ponder

- Read and meditate on Matthew 6:19-34.
- Write out one way that this passage challenges you as read it today.
- Write down one conviction that you can either make or renew in your life based on this study.

Ten Times Better - Day 5

Daniel 1:17-21

¹⁷ To these four young men God gave knowledge and understanding of all kinds of literature and learning. And Daniel could understand visions and dreams of all kinds.

¹⁸ At the end of the time set by the king to bring them into his service, the chief official presented them to Nebuchadnezzar. ¹⁹ The king talked with them, and he found none equal to Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah; so they entered the king's service. ²⁰ In every matter of wisdom and understanding about which the king questioned them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and enchanters in his whole kingdom.

²¹ And Daniel remained there until the first year of King Cyrus.

There is an old story that I have always been quite fond of. It involves two men who were both given large beams to carry on a difficult journey. The beams were long and heavy but they were told that they must keep their beams with them at all times. As they began the journey, it didn't take them long to discover that the journey was difficult and having to drag this large beam with them seemed to make it worse. After a few days, one of the men decided to cut a little bit off of the beam to make it lighter while the other continued to struggle on. Each day the first man cut a little more off, lightening his load and eventually allowing him to hoist it on his shoulders, making his travel even easier. This all seemed good until he reached a large gorge. To his horror, he discovered that the beam was too short to lay across the gorge and create a bridge but it would have been just the right length had he not shortened it. The other man eventually got to the same canyon and laid the beam across and quickly moved to the other side. The beam had made his journey more challenging, but it was just what he needed to complete his journey.

- Read James 1:2-3
- Why, according to James should we consider trials as "pure joy"?
- How does "knowing," as James says, help us to change the way we view struggles and trials? What is it that we are to know?
- What is your general response when faced with a challenge or trial? Do you view it as an opportunity to grow in doing God's will and learning faithfulness or do you struggle with the fact that God has called you to go through a trial?

These four young men could easily have made small compromises and given in to the pressures of the culture in which they were immersed. At every turn they had every reason to believe that the Babylonian army, language, culture, literature, and gods were superior to anything they had previously known. It would have almost been understandable if they would have bought into the idea that Babylon's way was better than God's way. That was certainly the assumption made by the king's official (see 1:10) who was afraid that the young men would look much worse if they did not follow the Babylonian way and instead did things God's way.

What they discovered, however, was that when they refused to compromise and instead insisted on the path of holiness and trust in the Lord they actually prospered. They prospered in the short run in their appearance as a result of refusing to rely on the feasts provided at the king's table but that was just the tip of the iceberg. As they continued to rely upon God in everything they found that God blessed them in every way. They prospered in the very things that Babylon saw as the great strengths of their culture; things like wisdom and understanding especially about the affairs of state.

- Are there any areas where you have made small compromises rather than standing up boldly for God's way?
- Read 1 Corinthians 3:18-23
- What distinction does Paul make between God's wisdom and the world's wisdom?
- Are there any areas where you have "bought into" the wisdom of the world and not really fully considered biblical wisdom in that area?

Because of the fidelity of Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, God's wisdom was glorified over and above the very best of the wisdom of the world at that time. None of this was an accident or a happy coincidence. God allowed Israel to be defeated. God allowed Daniel and the other young men to be taken into captivity in Babylon. God caused the young men to receive favorable treatment. These four men stayed faithful to God when all of the others apparently weren't. And God allowed them to make their way into the service of the king and to be successful in everything they touched.

What is important to note is that if these young men had not had faith in God's way rather than the way of the world into which they were immersed in Babylon, then Babylon would have never had a chance to know about the greatness of the God of Israel. They quickly found out that every single decision that people make, even the seemingly small ones, can have a great impact on God's will being known to those who are committed to the ways of the world.

- Read Hebrews 10:38-39
- How does this passage in Hebrews help inspire you when you consider standing up and being a bold reflection of God's light in a dark world?

Time to Ponder

- Read and meditate on 2 Corinthians 10:1-6.
- Write out one way that this passage challenges you as read it today.
- Write down one conviction that you can either make or renew in your life based on this study.

I Don't Deserve This - Day 6

Daniel 2:1-16

¹ In the second year of his reign, Nebuchadnezzar had dreams; his mind was troubled and he could not sleep. ² So the king summoned the magicians, enchanters, sorcerers and astrologers^[a] to tell him what he had dreamed. When they came in and stood before the king, ³ he said to them, "I have had a dream that troubles me and I want to know what it means."^[b]

⁴ Then the astrologers answered the king,^[c] "May the king live forever! Tell your servants the dream, and we will interpret it."

⁵ The king replied to the astrologers, "This is what I have firmly decided: If you do not tell me what my dream was and interpret it, I will have you cut into pieces and your houses turned into piles of rubble.

⁶ But if you tell me the dream and explain it, you will receive from me gifts and rewards and great honor. So tell me the dream and interpret it for me."

⁷ Once more they replied, "Let the king tell his servants the dream, and we will interpret it."

⁸ Then the king answered, "I am certain that you are trying to gain time, because you realize that this is what I have firmly decided: ⁹ If you do not tell me the dream, there is only one penalty for you. You have conspired to tell me misleading and wicked things, hoping the situation will change. So then, tell me the dream, and I will know that you can interpret it for me."

¹⁰ The astrologers answered the king, "There is no one on earth who can do what the king asks! No king, however great and mighty, has ever asked such a thing of any magician or enchanter or astrologer. ¹¹ What the king asks is too difficult. No one can reveal it to the king except the gods, and they do not live among humans."

¹² This made the king so angry and furious that he ordered the execution of all the wise men of Babylon. ¹³ So the decree was issued to put the wise men to death, and men were sent to look for Daniel and his friends to put them to death.

¹⁴ When Arioch, the commander of the king's guard, had gone out to put to death the wise men of Babylon, Daniel spoke to him with wisdom and tact. ¹⁵ He asked the king's officer, "Why did the king issue such a harsh decree?" Arioch then explained the matter to Daniel. ¹⁶ At this, Daniel went in to the king and asked for time, so that he might interpret the dream for him.

When the American Civil War began in the 19th century, the Union North found itself at a large disadvantage from the start. The South had a culture that had a much greater affinity for all things military than did the North and so the United States military academy was dominated by Southerners. Because of that, when most Southerners decided to withdraw from the United States military and side with the Confederacy at the outset of the rebellion, most Northerners became quite suspicious of anyone from the West Point academy and so the Northern army promoted most of their generals as political appointees and to fulfill favors. The men from West Point who were actually qualified to lead were largely relegated to lesser commands of little influence.

Once the war began, however, this strategy proved to be disastrous. The North lost many men and many battles due to inept leadership. As the war wore on, the qualified leaders from West Point finally had their wisdom and abilities recognized, they were promoted to the right positions, and the tide of the war quickly turned in favor of the North. It is interesting, though, to consider how many of those qualified men of wisdom felt when they were not being given opportunities to shine. Many of them waited patiently but others began to grow upset or even question their own abilities.

Daniel found himself in a similar position. At the end of chapter one, God had given Daniel three things: great wisdom, great influence, and great health for a long life. But

quickly at the beginning of this chapter we find all three of those things threatened, including his life.

Daniel had great wisdom and he had a position in the king's court but he still had no real influence. He appears to have been the low man on the totem pole and wasn't even informed of all that was going on although he was going to be killed right along with all of the others. Imagine how Daniel might have started to question God at this point. Why would God have blessed him with all of this ability only to let him fail now? Why would he have to suffer when he didn't do anything wrong? He had been faithful to God and this is how God was going to let things go down? He just did not deserve this.

- Have you ever been in a situation where you felt like you were being disrespected or not fully appreciated?
- What is your response during those challenging times? Do you begin to question God and get angry with him?
- Read 1 Peter 2:18-25
- How does this passage challenge us to act when we are being mistreated or slighted?
- How does relating our own struggles to Jesus' death on the Cross help us to understand that God is truly in control of trying times?

The fact was that Daniel did have wisdom and it was God's plan for him to enjoy great influence and a long life in Babylon. What will become clear is that none of that could have come to pass if it weren't for such a trying and even frightening time for Daniel. If the king had not threatened the life of all of the wise men of Babylon, Daniel never could have advanced. What Daniel would learn was that God truly was sovereign and in control of events, even when it came to the mighty king of Babylon.

- One of the most important ways that we learn to know and trust God is by experiencing his work in our lives when we trust him even when things seem bleak. Take some time to read the following passages and see this concept in action in different ways: Genesis 22:12; Exodus 18:10-12; 1 Kings 17:7-24; 2 Kings 5:1-15; Acts 12:5-11; Romans 4:17-21

Time to Ponder

- Read and meditate on Romans 5:1-5.
- Write out one way that this passage challenges you as read it today.
- Write down one conviction that you can either make or renew in your life based on this study.

My God is Bigger - Day 7

Daniel 2:17-23

¹⁷ Then Daniel returned to his house and explained the matter to his friends Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah. ¹⁸ He urged them to plead for mercy from the God of heaven concerning this mystery, so that he and his friends might not be executed with the rest of the wise men of Babylon. ¹⁹ During the night the mystery was revealed to Daniel in a vision. Then Daniel praised the God of heaven ²⁰ and said:

“Praise be to the name of God for ever and ever;
wisdom and power are his.

²¹ He changes times and seasons;
he deposes kings and raises up others.

He gives wisdom to the wise
and knowledge to the discerning.

²² He reveals deep and hidden things;
he knows what lies in darkness,
and light dwells with him.

²³ I thank and praise you, God of my ancestors:
You have given me wisdom and power,
you have made known to me what we asked of you,
you have made known to us the dream of the king.”

The other day I happened to have the pleasure to once again catch a portion of the most entertaining movie ever made. Of course I don't have to say it because you all know already, but just for formality's sake I will; I was watching "Independence Day." There is a great scene before the final big battle of the movie where one of the characters, a scientist, tells the President of the United States his plan to take down the alien ships. Despite some hesitance on the part of some of his advisors, the President agrees to the plan. The only problem is that there is no one to drive the alien ship back to the mother ship which was an integral part of the plan. Another character steps forward and says that he is able to fly the alien ship, so the plan will move forward. As the President leaves, the scientist turns to the pilot and asks if he really can fly the alien ship. The pilot turns to him and says "can you really do all that stuff you just said?" It's a priceless scene where both men have perhaps overstated their abilities just a bit, although in the end they do pull it off.

King Nebuchadnezzar had a dream that troubled him greatly and it seems from what we are told in the text that he either could not recall the dream or would not divulge the details to the wise men of Babylon. It seems that God had put in his heart the idea that they should, for once, prove their claims. If they truly were seers then he should not have to tell them the dream. Otherwise they could interpret the details however they wanted. The wise men found this an unreasonable request but it certainly exposed them as fakes. Apparently, they couldn't back up their claims. In response, however, the king was threatening to put all of the wise men in the kingdom to death, including Daniel and the other young Jewish men who had no part in the initial failure. The question that now must have arisen in the heart of Daniel was whether or not to continue to trust God. He had followed God in every way possible and what did he get for his trouble? It seemed that he was going to lose his life. Daniel must have been wondering, at least for a moment, why God would allow this and what he was going to do now?

- When you face a really tough situation in your life, what is your response? To whom do you turn?
- Read Isaiah 55:6-7
- No matter what situation we find ourselves in, who should we turn to in difficult times?
- Even when the problem seems to have come from being obedient to God, we must continue to show faith and trust in God. This is precisely what Daniel and the others did here and would continue to do throughout their lives

As we will see in the next passage, Daniel is about to make some rather large claims on the behalf of God, telling the King that he can tell him what his dream was and interpret it. Unlike the characters in the previously mentioned movie, Daniel wasn't just hoping that would happen or speaking from bravado. What caused him to have such confidence? He kept his eyes on God as the unwavering object of his faith.

These young Jewish men would surely have been quite familiar with the stories of Joseph who was sold off to Egypt by his brothers. Once there, Joseph continued to trust the Lord even after he was wrongly thrown into prison, his sole crime being that he was faithful to God. In prison, though, God had worked powerfully through Joseph, allowing him to interpret dreams and eventually become the second most powerful man in all of Egypt. God had allowed Joseph to suffer mightily but Joseph remained humble and focused on his God and God raised him up through those very circumstances. The point of a seemingly great defeat became the circumstances of God's great victory because Joseph trusted God. Daniel had learned that lesson well and believed that God could use him just the same if he had the same reliance and trust that Joseph had.

Thus, when faced with his impending death, Daniel didn't panic or worry. Daniel turned to God who revealed the dreams to him just as he had to Joseph. Daniel didn't worry because he knew that his God was bigger than the situation. He then gave thanks to God for his wisdom, his power, and the fact that he had revealed those things to Daniel. Daniel never wavered in the face of trials because he simply knew what his God was capable of. What about you?

- Read Matthew 14:22-31
- Why was Peter able to walk on the water?
- Why did he begin to sink?
- What happens in your own life when you keep your eyes on Jesus? What happens when you begin to worry about the winds and the waves around you? Do you truly believe that God is more powerful than the wind and waves?

Time to Ponder

- Read and meditate on 2 Kings 18:3-8.
- Write out one way that this passage challenges you as read it today.
- Write down one conviction that you can either make or renew in your life based on this study.

It Can't Be Done - Day 8

Daniel 2:24-28

²⁴ Then Daniel went to Arioch, whom the king had appointed to execute the wise men of Babylon, and said to him, "Do not execute the wise men of Babylon. Take me to the king, and I will interpret his dream for him."

²⁵ Arioch took Daniel to the king at once and said, "I have found a man among the exiles from Judah who can tell the king what his dream means."

²⁶ The king asked Daniel (also called Belteshazzar), "Are you able to tell me what I saw in my dream and interpret it?"

²⁷ Daniel replied, "No wise man, enchanter, magician or diviner can explain to the king the mystery he has asked about, ²⁸ but there is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries. He has shown King Nebuchadnezzar what will happen in days to come. Your dream and the visions that passed through your mind as you were lying in bed are these:

I recently had a very interesting conversation with a young lady who was really struggling with the circumstances of her life. She was nearly running herself into the ground trying to work and go to school and get ahead in life. But the more she did that and the more she made efforts to get to a comfortable place in her life, the more she seemed to be depressed and unhappy. She lamented to me with a great deal of frustration that she felt like just giving up at times because she was starting to feel like she just could not do it all.

I think she was telling me all this, looking for some comforting words about how she could make it if she just hung in there, but I surprised her. I told her that she couldn't make it. She looked at me with a stunned look on her face. That's when I explained to her that she was trying to do what only God can do. Only God can truly provide for us and give true meaning to our lives at the same time. If she was at the point where she was feeling like she couldn't do it, then that was good. That's right when God really starts to do his best work in our lives.

- Have you ever spent time thinking about what aspects of your life are really God's work and what parts are your job?
- Read Matthew 6:19-33, for instance, and take some time to distinguish between your role and God's work when it comes to the things mentioned in this passage. Continue to study out this topic in the rest of the Scriptures to get a good picture of God's work versus our work.
- What can happen when we begin to think that we are responsible for things that only God can truly do?

The kingdom of Babylon was full of wise men. In fact, Babylon was well known throughout the world for its knowledge and supposed wisdom. The role of these wise men was to advise the king on all matters that affected the kingdom. They claimed to have the ability to discern present events but also to interpret dreams, and even see into

the future to guide the king wisely. In fact, these wise men had books of dream interpretation that they could turn to and had been made over time that supposedly told them what each item in a dream meant. That didn't always work, though, just as it didn't when the wise men of Egypt tried to interpret Pharaoh's dream.

The King had thrown a curveball at these men, though. He either would not tell them his dream or could not remember the details but knew that he had had a troubling dream that he wanted to have interpreted. The King actually expected these men to divine what the dream was and then interpret it. If they really had the abilities that they claimed, this should have been no problem. Yet, their response in verses 10-11 made it clear that they were being asked to do something that only the gods could do and they didn't see any gods standing around. In other words, they were telling the King that he was asking the impossible of them. It couldn't be done and his request was unreasonable.

- Read Luke 18:23-28
- What are you trying to accomplish in your life right now that really is impossible on your own and needs to be turned over to God in faith? Are you trying to save a family member on your own efforts, or provide for your family through your own hard work and abilities, or is it something else?

Daniel showed incredible courage here because, as we discussed yesterday, he believed in God. He had spent so much time in God's presence and trusting in God that the Lord had become more of a reality to him than the present age and the threats of the King. Why fear the King when you have spent so much time in the presence of the Creator of the universe? We have no reason to believe that Daniel had ever interpreted a dream in his life but he knew that such a thing was no problem for God. When the King asked him about his ability to divine and interpret dreams, Daniel was honest. The wise men were right, it was impossible for man. But God in heaven could do it. What the wise men could not do, God would. God was, in other words, greater than all men including the King. That was a fact that would require more convincing for Nebuchadnezzar to fully accept, as we will see in the following chapters. But the concept was declared boldly by Daniel here. There are many things that are absolutely impossible for men, but God alone can do them. Do you really believe that?

Time to Ponder

- Read and meditate on 1 Corinthians 3:5-9.
- Write out one way that this passage challenges you as read it today.
- Write down one conviction that you can either make or renew in your life based on this study.

It's All Mine - Day 9

Daniel 2:29-43

²⁹ “As Your Majesty was lying there, your mind turned to things to come, and the revealer of mysteries showed you what is going to happen. ³⁰ As for me, this mystery has been revealed to me, not because I have greater wisdom than anyone else alive, but so that Your Majesty may know the interpretation and that you may understand what went through your mind.

³¹ “Your Majesty looked, and there before you stood a large statue—an enormous, dazzling statue, awesome in appearance. ³² The head of the statue was made of pure gold, its chest and arms of silver, its belly and thighs of bronze, ³³ its legs of iron, its feet partly of iron and partly of baked clay. ³⁴ While you were watching, a rock was cut out, but not by human hands. It struck the statue on its feet of iron and clay and smashed them. ³⁵ Then the iron, the clay, the bronze, the silver and the gold were all broken to pieces and became like chaff on a threshing floor in the summer. The wind swept them away without leaving a trace. But the rock that struck the statue became a huge mountain and filled the whole earth.

³⁶ “This was the dream, and now we will interpret it to the king. ³⁷ Your Majesty, you are the king of kings. The God of heaven has given you dominion and power and might and glory; ³⁸ in your hands he has placed all mankind and the beasts of the field and the birds in the sky. Wherever they live, he has made you ruler over them all. You are that head of gold.

³⁹ “After you, another kingdom will arise, inferior to yours. Next, a third kingdom, one of bronze, will rule over the whole earth. ⁴⁰ Finally, there will be a fourth kingdom, strong as iron—for iron breaks and smashes everything—and as iron breaks things to pieces, so it will crush and break all the others.

⁴¹ Just as you saw that the feet and toes were partly of baked clay and partly of iron, so this will be a divided kingdom; yet it will have some of the strength of iron in it, even as you saw iron mixed with clay. ⁴² As the toes were partly iron and partly clay, so this kingdom will be partly strong and partly brittle. ⁴³ And just as you saw the iron mixed with baked clay, so the people will be a mixture and will not remain united, any more than iron mixes with clay.

When I was a kid my sister and I used to fight a lot about our things. We were constantly bickering about who could touch what, who could go into whose room when, and who was in charge over certain toys. Chaos could really break loose if something was broken. If one of us broke something that the other one considered theirs, it would be viewed as a grievous act of heinous violence that must be immediately avenged, usually by making amends for the broken item or by simply breaking something that was equally dear to the offender. These little squabbles could go on endlessly until one of our parents would come in and remind us of one very important detail. We didn't actually own anything. Everything we had came from our parents and it was theirs ultimately. We owned nothing and therefore our little squabbles of ownership and territory were pointless and silly. We had clearly lost sight of from where everything had come.

This is the lesson that Nebuchadnezzar had to learn, a lesson that the most important and powerful people in the world forget. We can get quite full of ourselves and our accomplishments and squabble over what we have, what we think we should be given, or how we think we should be acknowledged. But this is to lose sight of the fact that God is the creator of the earth and everything in it. He is sovereign and if we fail to recognize that as Nebuchadnezzar did, we will have to learn that important lesson one way or the other. God gave the King a dream to demonstrate to him that it was God, not the King of Babylon who truly ruled the world. As we will see, he did not get the message right away and would have to be humbled more.

- Read Psalm 24
- Why does this Psalm start with the reminder that the earth is the Lord's and everything in it?
- Consider how often that reminder is given in the New Testament (Acts 4:24; 14:15; 17:24; 1 Cor. 10:26; Col. 1:16). Why do you think that this phrase and others like are used so often?
- What does it mean to you today personally to remember that the earth is the Lord's and everything in it? How does knowing that change your daily life or your typical mindset?

Daniel told Nebuchadnezzar that there would be four great earthly kingdoms. The first was the kingdom of Babylon, represented by the pure gold head of the statue. But his kingdom would eventually fall. Another kingdom, that of the Medes and Persian Empire, would rise. This kingdom would be inferior and represented by silver. Next would come the bronze kingdom of the Greeks. Finally would be the Roman empire of iron. The primary purpose for this dream was not to give Nebuchadnezzar a run-down of the next several hundred years of history but was to humble him. The best that Babylon had to offer could not tell him his dream or interpret it, let alone tell him the future that was to come. Only God could do that because he was sovereign over the universe. This was a reminder to the King that he was not really in charge of anything that God wasn't allowing him to be.

- Read Isaiah 41:21-24
- Why does God mock the idols and false gods?
- Why is being able to accurately predict the future such an important act when it comes to demonstration of real power?
- Are there any areas in your life that you have begun to see as your realm or something that you have accomplished and forgotten that God is truly sovereign over everything and desires to be glorified and acknowledged in everything we do?

Through this dream, God wasn't just trying to humiliate the King and tell him that he was nothing; quite the opposite. He was the king of kings that had great dominion and glory. What he had forgotten was that his position came from God. Failing to recognize God and give him the glory is to set him aside and to put ourselves in the position of being God. We must remember that everything that we have is from God and give him the glory.

Time to Ponder

- Read and meditate on Colossians 1:15-23.
- Write out one way that this passage challenges you as read it today.
- Write down one conviction that you can either make or renew in your life based on this study.

Laughable Pride - Day 10

Daniel 2:44-49

⁴⁴ "In the time of those kings, the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed, nor will it be left to another people. It will crush all those kingdoms and bring them to an end, but it will itself endure forever. ⁴⁵ This is the meaning of the vision of the rock cut out of a mountain, but not by human hands—a rock that broke the iron, the bronze, the clay, the silver and the gold to pieces.

"The great God has shown the king what will take place in the future. The dream is true and its interpretation is trustworthy."

⁴⁶ Then King Nebuchadnezzar fell prostrate before Daniel and paid him honor and ordered that an offering and incense be presented to him. ⁴⁷ The king said to Daniel, "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."

⁴⁸ Then the king placed Daniel in a high position and lavished many gifts on him. He made him ruler over the entire province of Babylon and placed him in charge of all its wise men. ⁴⁹ Moreover, at Daniel's request the king appointed Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego administrators over the province of Babylon, while Daniel himself remained at the royal court.

I've been around many basketball games in my life and heard a lot of trash talking before, during, and after games, but the other day at a basketball game I experienced something that amazed me. I was coaching my son's second grade YMCA basketball game and as we were warming up the players from the other team were talking to my players telling them that they were going to beat them in some very colorful ways like telling them that they were going to chew them up like crackers and swallow them. Yes, there were second graders talking trash! It was so sad that it was almost funny. I told my guys, however, to just remain focused and not respond. Their talk bothered my guys a little but they stayed focused on warming up. As the game started these kids kept talking and threatening and were even pushing my players during the game. By the second half our team was leading 30-2, and amazingly, this other team continued to talk trash about how good they were. By that time, though, we didn't have to tell our players anything. The actions of these other boys had become laughable by this point. How can you talk trash when you're getting beaten so badly?

In a much grander way, this was the message that was being sent to Nebuchadnezzar through his dream. The King thought rather highly of himself and was quite willing to declare himself as the most powerful man in the world but he was tiny in comparison to God. To continue to consider himself before he considered God,, and even think of himself as being greater than God was sheer foolishness.

- Nebuchadnezzar had become prey to foolish pride. Can you identify with that? As you look back at your life, (or even as you look at yourself right now) what examples do you see of foolish pride?
- What are some of the inherent dangers involved with foolish pride?
- Read a sampling of Proverbs on pride: Prov. 8:3; 11:2; 13:10; 14:3; 16:18; 29:23. How does God feel about pride?

As Daniel continued to interpret the King's dream, he moves past the kingdoms that would rule the earth leading up to the Messiah. They would be a mixture of power and strength but each would eventually fall despite how great they might have seen themselves as being. The real truth was that none of those kingdoms or kings was truly in control, including Nebuchadnezzar. It is God who is sovereign over history and over kingdoms. He would establish a kingdom that will never be subject to the whims of history. God's kingdom will last forever and would crush all of those other kingdoms in all of the ways that truly matter. As we look back over the thousands of years since this dream, we see that truth loud and clear. Those other kingdoms have come and gone but God's kingdom will never be shaken. All of those kingdoms would fail to completely honor God and would continue on in their foolish pride and rebellion towards God's rule and they would fall. The Proverbs tell us that "Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall" (Prov. 16:18). What is true of kingdoms is just as true of individual human beings.

- Read Hebrews 12:25-28
- What did the writer of Hebrews mean in saying that God would shake the earth but we have a kingdom that cannot be shaken?
- What does this tell us about where we should place our confidence, trust, and investments?
- Read Psalm 2:1-6
- What is God's response to the rulers and kingdoms that continue to rebel against God?

On hearing that Daniel not only knew his dream but could also interpret it, the King was moved to declare that Daniel's God was amazing. He was impressed but still did not see Daniel's God as his God. He only recognized that there was a real power that was evident.

As impressed as he might have been with God, Nebuchadnezzar still saw himself as greater than any god, as will be evidenced by his actions to follow. Even still, God had worked to ensure that Daniel and the others had risen to great positions of influence. Israel had been crushed and many of her best young men taken away, but God had not lost control. Although Israel had been defeated, those loyal to the true God could know that godly young men had quickly been raised up to positions of high influence and power in Babylon. As incredible as that all seems, Nebuchadnezzar still failed to fully humble himself before God and recognize his sovereignty. He would fail to fully humble himself and would continue in foolish pride, and he would be humbled soon enough.

Time to Ponder

- Read and meditate on Philippians 2:1-11.
- Write out one way that this passage challenges you as read it today.
- Write down one conviction that you can either make or renew in your life based on this study.

Dangerous Defiance - Day 11

Daniel 3:1-3

¹ King Nebuchadnezzar made an image of gold, sixty cubits high and six cubits wide,^[a] and set it up on the plain of Dura in the province of Babylon. ² He then summoned the satraps, prefects, governors, advisers, treasurers, judges, magistrates and all the other provincial officials to come to the dedication of the image he had set up. ³ So the satraps, prefects, governors, advisers, treasurers, judges, magistrates and all the other provincial officials assembled for the dedication of the image that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up, and they stood before it.

It never ceases to amaze me just how quickly small children can begin to rebel against their parents. The parents take home this small bundle of joy from the hospital full of love for them and they raise and nurture them at great expense to themselves emotionally, physically, and in just about every way. They take care of the small child's every need, providing them everything including life. Then suddenly, this perfect little creature begins to fight back and try to do things their own way. This begins at just a few months into their little lives and gains momentum with each passing day.

I'm not quite sure why it is that human beings, from babies on up to adults, seem to rebel against and defy the very people that provide and care for them the most but we do. In some ways, seeking our own independence can be positive, but in many ways it usually is not. No matter how we slice it, if left to our own devices we are defiant creatures that are bent on doing our own will. As a whole of humanity, we rebel against our parents, we rebel against those in authority over us once we leave our homes, and we rebel against God.

- Can you point to a time in your life when you lived defiantly towards God?
- Do you struggle with feeling or being defiant towards authority, whether they are human authorities or God? In what ways?
- What important truth does Jesus relay about doing God's will rather than our own will in Mark 3:34-35

It is quite probable that the events of 2 Kings 24:1-2 took place shortly before the events of Daniel 3. What that means is that there was a brief period where several kings had experienced a brief period of freedom from the rule of Babylon and rebelled a bit to do what they wanted without regard to Nebuchadnezzar. This puts Daniel 3 in a bit of historical context. It is likely then that Nebuchadnezzar's image was a loyalty test for his vassals all over his kingdom. The King wanted everyone to be reminded that he was sovereign over them and to give them an opportunity to demonstrate their loyalty.

What is important here, though, is not so much that Nebuchadnezzar had built a giant statue in his image. The key detail is that he made it out of gold. The King had listened to Daniel perhaps as little as a year before interpret the dream that the King had. The dream depicted a statue with a head of gold that symbolized his own kingdom of

Babylon, which would then be succeeded by other kingdoms, culminating in God's own kingdom which would crush all of the others.

Nebuchadnezzar clearly heard what he wanted to during that interpretation. Nebuchadnezzar had praised Daniel's God but evidently began to think differently over time. He didn't like the idea that God had appointed a time for his kingdom to rule but then a time for it to go. He must have begun to think that it would be nice if that statue was made completely of gold, signifying that his golden kingdom would last forever. If he could exercise his power and demand loyalty from the entire known world, surely he could ensure that his kingdom would last. He wanted to ensure that his statue wasn't just a head of gold, but that the whole statue was golden. His Babylon would never be succeeded by another. In effect, he was defying the dream that God had given him and interpreted through Daniel, and declaring that God was not going to set his kingdom aside. He would ensure that it would last forever. That was his will and he just didn't care about God's declared will.

This action brings into sharp focus the theme of the book of Daniel of exactly whose god is God. Who is in control of history? This wasn't primarily about bowing down to a statue. It was about bowing down to the will of God or trying to exalt one's own will over that of God.

- Read 2 Corinthians 5:14-15
- What is the result, according to Paul, of Jesus dying on the cross?
- Read Romans 12:1-2 and Colossians 1:9
- For those who have entered into Christ and no longer live for ourselves, what is the place of God's will in our lives?

Defying God might come naturally to us but it is dangerous. When we defy God's will it puts us in the position of being enemies of God and subject to his discipline and wrath (see Romans 2:5). This is a lesson that, as we will see, Nebuchadnezzar had to learn the hard way.

Time to Ponder

- Read and meditate on Ephesians 6:5-8.
- Write out one way that this passage challenges you as read it today.
- Write down one conviction that you can either make or renew in your life based on this study.

Peer Pressure - Day 12

Daniel 3:4-12

⁴ Then the herald loudly proclaimed, "Nations and peoples of every language, this is what you are commanded to do: ⁵ As soon as you hear the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipe and all kinds of music, you must fall down and worship the image of gold that King Nebuchadnezzar has set up. ⁶ Whoever does not fall down and worship will immediately be thrown into a blazing furnace."

⁷ Therefore, as soon as they heard the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp and all kinds of music, all the nations and peoples of every language fell down and worshiped the image of gold that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up.

⁸ At this time some astrologers^[bl] came forward and denounced the Jews. ⁹ They said to King Nebuchadnezzar, "May the king live forever! ¹⁰ Your Majesty has issued a decree that everyone who hears the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipe and all kinds of music must fall down and worship the image of gold, ¹¹ and that whoever does not fall down and worship will be thrown into a blazing furnace. ¹² But there are some Jews whom you have set over the affairs of the province of Babylon—Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego—who pay no attention to you, Your Majesty. They neither serve your gods nor worship the image of gold you have set up."

Years ago I was teaching a high school history class and we were going to examine the topic of how people can do terrible things because they give into peer pressure and follow along with the crowd. To make the point at the beginning of the unit, we recreated a famous psychological experiment within my class. I put up on the projector a series of questions. Each question had four shapes, for instance four lines of different lengths. The students were asked to write down which of the lines was longer. The answer was obvious but every student in the class had been prepped to give the same wrong answer. After going through all twenty-five questions, we went through them as a class with each student reading their answer out loud.

As I mentioned, all of the students had been prepped to give the same wrong answer, that is, except for the last student in the class who knew nothing of the experiment. Each student called out the same wrong answer much to the surprise of the last student who thought that the correct answer seemed obvious. After three or four times of answering differently than the entire class, she finally gave in and started to give what she believed to be the wrong answer simply because she had grown weary in giving an answer that differed from everyone else. The point of this little experiment is to show how quickly human beings will cave into pressure from those around them.

- Have you ever felt like that student when it comes to living differently than everyone around you?
- What can be the most difficult aspect for you in not being like those around you?
- Some of us really need to ask ourselves, "are you different from those around you in the way you live"?
- Read 1 Peter 2:9-12
- How does this passage help you to prepare to live against the grain of society?

The pressure under Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego must have been enormous. The King had called for a show of loyalty from everyone around the kingdom, including these three young men who had committed themselves to remaining loyal to God above all else. We aren't told where Daniel was during this particular encounter, but it is likely that he was somewhere out of the nation of Babylon or in a far-reaching corner of the kingdom handling some of the king's business. Wherever he was, he was protected from this particular incident but the three other young men were not.

They were hard-pressed to conform to the patterns of the world around them and not remain true to God. It was quite common back then to view kings as divine and Nebuchadnezzar had obviously accepted that concept to one degree or another. He was going to show the world that the golden statue of Babylon and the kingdom of the great Nebuchadnezzar would live forever. There would be no crumbling and giving way to lesser kingdoms of silver, bronze, and iron, as Daniel had interpreted through the dream of the King and the guidance of the sovereign God of Israel.

But we have to remember that this world of Babylon was all that these young men knew anymore. It is the only reality that they had on a daily basis. It would have been easy for what they saw around them every day to become more reality to them than serving and remaining loyal to God. They could have easily shrunk back from their loyalty to God but they chose not to. They never once caved into the pressure of being like everyone else around them.

- Read Hebrews 10:38-39; 12:1-3
- What does God say about those who shrink back? What does he say about those that continue to live in faith?
- According to Hebrews 12:1-3 (within the context of the entirety of chapter 11), what is one of the great motivators for Christians to not shrink back but stay strong in our faith?
- What do you think motivated the three young Jewish men to stay so committed to their loyalty to God?
- Read Romans 12:1-2
- According to this passage, how do we avoid being conformed to the patterns of the world around us?

Time to Ponder

- Read and meditate on 1 Peter 1:13-21.
- Write out one way that this passage challenges you as read it today.
- Write down one conviction that you can either make or renew in your life based on this study.

Not an Inch - Day 13

Daniel 3:13-23

¹³ Furious with rage, Nebuchadnezzar summoned Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. So these men were brought before the king, ¹⁴ and Nebuchadnezzar said to them, "Is it true, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, that you do not serve my gods or worship the image of gold I have set up? ¹⁵ Now when you hear the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipe and all kinds of music, if you are ready to fall down and worship the image I made, very good. But if you do not worship it, you will be thrown immediately into a blazing furnace. Then what god will be able to rescue you from my hand?"

¹⁶ Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego replied to him, "King Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. ¹⁷ If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to deliver us from it, and he will deliver us^[c] from Your Majesty's hand. ¹⁸ But even if he does not, we want you to know, Your Majesty, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up."

¹⁹ Then Nebuchadnezzar was furious with Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, and his attitude toward them changed. He ordered the furnace heated seven times hotter than usual ²⁰ and commanded some of the strongest soldiers in his army to tie up Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego and throw them into the blazing furnace. ²¹ So these men, wearing their robes, trousers, turbans and other clothes, were bound and thrown into the blazing furnace. ²² The king's command was so urgent and the furnace so hot that the flames of the fire killed the soldiers who took up Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, ²³ and these three men, firmly tied, fell into the blazing furnace.

We were preparing for my first state championship game as a high school basketball coach when I found out the day before the game that our two most important players had skipped a class the previous day. We'd always had a policy that would suspend players for a game if they skipped a class but they thought they could get away with it without getting caught and if they did, surely they wouldn't get punished for such an important game, or so they thought. At that moment I had a decision to make and it wasn't an easy one. Punishing them felt like I was punishing the entire team for something that they didn't do. We quickly decided, though, that they would not play. In the next day and a half until the game, however, I was tied in knots over the decision. I went back and forth in my mind as I had more and more time to think about it. Who knows what I would have done if I had given myself more time to think things through? We lost the game by 6 points but I still feel that it turned out far better for those young men in the long run because they learned a valuable life lesson.

Compromise can be easy if we give ourselves time in certain situations. That doesn't mean that we shouldn't think carefully about the things that we do, but in certain situations taking time can mean that we just have more time to roll around thoughts of compromise in our heads and rationalize less-than-ideal decisions. It is easy to know what is right initially and then begin to talk yourself out of with arguments that sound so good and so rational. This is true whether we are talking about disciplining our children, putting God first over a big project that needs our attention, or playing a couple of star basketball players in a big game.

- Can you identify with the temptation to compromise in your devotion to God or your holiness?

- What are the things that most tempt you to want to compromise?
- Read Mark 12:30
- How is this principle important when it comes to avoiding compromise in our lives?

There is no indication that if they had more time to think about it, that Shadrach and the other two would have been tempted to compromise, but they gave no such opportunity. They immediately declared their loyalty to God publicly and gave themselves no wiggle room. They would not take part in worshipping the image of the King as everyone else was, even if that meant death. They would rather die being loyal to God than compromise and be successful.

But think of the temptations had they given themselves time to think about it. It would have been easy to rationalize and argue that if they continued in their obstinate disobedience that they would be killed, life would go on, but their godly influence over the king would be lost. They could have thought that they were trying to be obedient to God but that everyone else would think that it was an act of political disobedience and the whole point of what they were doing would be missed so they might as well just go ahead and compromise for the time being. They could have argued that to bow down once to satisfy the king wouldn't really have affected their devotion to God in their hearts. They could have even come up with a plan where they bowed before the statue but would determine to pray to the true God while doing so. These all sound quite convincing and rational but compromise always does. Compromise, though, is an act of changing the question to fit the answer. Rather than asking how they could be completely loyal to God with no exceptions, they could have changed the question to "what can we do to stay alive and still not completely turn our backs on God?"

They would not compromise, however, because they knew first, that God was sovereign and would bring them through whatever situations they were in as a result of being loyal to him, according to his will. They knew, second, that the Scriptures had forbidden them to compromise or to worship an image in anyway. All the rationalizations in the world wouldn't change the clear call of Scriptures. They knew, third, that they were willing to die for their convictions. They had already given their hearts to God completely so when the unexpected time came, the decision had already been made; they didn't have to think about it at all. They had their convictions settled and would not give an inch.

- What areas of your life are you tempted to compromise in right now?
- Take some time today to consider that carefully and then search the Scriptures to find out what they say on those topics. This may take a few days and you may even need some help from another brother or sister to make a complete study, but make sure to do it.
- After completing your scriptural study, write down what your convictions are in those areas and determine before God to keep those convictions with no compromise.

Time to Ponder

- Read and meditate on Galatians 2:20.
- Write out one way that this passage challenges you as read it today.
- Write down one conviction that you can either make or renew in your life based on this study.

Who's That Other Guy? - Day 14

Daniel 3:24-26

²⁴ Then King Nebuchadnezzar leaped to his feet in amazement and asked his advisers, "Weren't there three men that we tied up and threw into the fire?"

They replied, "Certainly, Your Majesty."

²⁵ He said, "Look! I see four men walking around in the fire, unbound and unharmed, and the fourth looks like a son of the gods."

²⁶ Nebuchadnezzar then approached the opening of the blazing furnace and shouted, "Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, servants of the Most High God, come out! Come here!"

One of my favorite old shows is still "The Little House on the Prairie." That was a great show that was a wonderful mixture of drama, comedy, and morals. In one episode, two of the young teenage boys in the town of Walnut Grove had decided that they were capable of traveling to another town on their own without adult supervision, a trip that would require much walking and several nights sleeping out in the open. After much hesitancy and a little teasing, their fathers decided that they could attempt to go on this trial on their own. What they didn't tell the boys, though, was that they were going to follow along secretly behind them and make sure that they could make it. Even though it might seem like they were alone, they never would be.

It is easy to take our eyes off of God and begin to worry in the face of all of the problems that we might be facing. During those times it is certainly easy to feel like we are alone. What we can always be encouraged by, however, is that God is always with his people. We may not see him visibly or even be fully aware of his presence but God is there and he isn't just following along behind us secretly. God is with his people during their struggles and trials. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, quickly found the truth of that. They could have easily been more worried about the reality of the raging inferno into which they were about to be thrown but knew the reality of God even more. Despite the problems, they kept their eyes focused on God.

- What is your usual response when you face difficult trials or situations that cause you fear? Do you worry and get filled with anxiety or do you immediately turn your eyes to God and keep them there?
- Read Matthew 14:22-31
- What was Peter able to do when he kept his eyes on Jesus?
- What was he doing when he began to sink?
- Take notice that the wind and waves were there the whole time but it was only when Peter focused on them that he had problems. What principle does this remind us of in our own lives?

Nebuchadnezzar had been left with little choice in this situation. He had boldly built an image of himself and called everyone to worship it as a sign of their loyalty to him. He likely did not want to have these three valuable young men killed but he did want only

loyal people around him and to not kill them would have made him look weak. So he gave the orders to have them killed.

It would have been easy for them to feel like God had abandoned them at this point or had failed to protect him but he had not. Rather than looking at the fire and starting to worry or beg for their lives, they knew that they couldn't lose as long as they remained focused and loyal to God. If he wanted them to die in the fire then they would truly be numbered among God's righteous and would be with God for eternity as well as serving as a marvelous example for God's people of loyalty even in the face of death. But they also knew that their God was a God who could burn a bush and not have it consumed. If he wanted to preserve them as a powerful sign to the king, then he could and would.

As they were thrown into the fire, it was there that they saw the presence of God in the clearest sense that they ever had in their life. They were suddenly in the presence of the pre-incarnate Jesus Christ. As we read this account of them standing in the fire, completely un-singed, we find a very important principle. As we face the fiery furnaces of our own lives, we must remember that if we try to avoid the trial, we are probably doing so at the high cost of taking our eyes off of God and worrying about the situation. But when we trust God and calmly go through the trial, it is in the midst of the fire itself that we will find God. We can rest assured that if we continue to be faithful and loyal to God he will be there with us no matter the fire we find ourselves tossed into.

- What trial are you facing right now? What does James 1:2-4 tell you about facing that struggle and trial?
- Read Hebrews 12:1-3.
- What does this passage encourage us to do?
- Why do you think the idea of "joy" is mentioned in both the James and Hebrews passage?
- Think of that struggle or trial that you are going through right now. What does it mean specifically to keep your eyes on Jesus and have faith in God through that particular situation?

Time to Ponder

- Read and meditate on Matthew 28:20
- Write out one way that this passage challenges or encourages you as read it today.
- Write down one conviction that you can either make or renew in your life based on this study.

How Will They Know? - Day 15

Daniel 3:27-30

So Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego came out of the fire, ²⁷ and the satraps, prefects, governors and royal advisers crowded around them. They saw that the fire had not harmed their bodies, nor was a hair of their heads singed; their robes were not scorched, and there was no smell of fire on them.

²⁸ Then Nebuchadnezzar said, "Praise be to the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, who has sent his angel and rescued his servants! They trusted in him and defied the king's command and were willing to give up their lives rather than serve or worship any god except their own God. ²⁹ Therefore I decree that the people of any nation or language who say anything against the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego be cut into pieces and their houses be turned into piles of rubble, for no other god can save in this way."

³⁰ Then the king promoted Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in the province of Babylon.

Have you ever spent day after day, week after week doing something a certain way only to find out much later that you were doing it wrongly or that there was a much easier way to accomplish your task? The only problem is that you didn't know because no one ever told you. I think I have that experience about once a month as I learn some new shortcut or something on the computer that I never knew I could do. Knowledge of the truth can be freeing and helpful once we have it but a great deal of time can be lost or damage done when we don't know the right way and no one has told us.

It's one thing, though, if no one told you because they didn't know that you didn't know but what if those around you did know the truth or a better way and just chose not to tell you for whatever reason? How would you feel then?

The truth doesn't matter a whole lot if we don't ever share it with others and allow them to know the truth or the best way. That's true whether it comes to our jobs, using a computer, raising a family, or following the one, true God.

- Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego knew the truth of following God and were committed to that regardless of the repercussions personally. Do you have the same convictions to hold to God's standards in your life despite the possible negative outcomes?
- Read Philippians 3:10
- How does this passage challenge and convict you today in your own life?
- When others look at your life do they really see you holding to and living out the truth?

Shadrach and the other two young men had been following God as the sovereign Lord of the world as their primary conviction for their entire lives. Everything else that they did in life flowed from that conviction. As they faced the fiery furnace of Babylon for refusing to bow down the King's image, they had no guarantee or promise from God that they

would not suffer a terribly painful death. But the specter of death paled in comparison to their convictions about following God.

It would have been easy for them to rationalize the situation and make small compromises but once again they refused and as a result, the King of Babylon had another chance to see the truth of the one, true God displayed before him. If Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego had failed to live firmly by their convictions and declare why they were doing so, even at great risk to their own livelihoods and lives, then Nebuchadnezzar would have never known about the truth of God. True, it took him several opportunities before he would humble himself fully before God, but without the convictions of Daniel and the three young men at the center of this encounter, Nebuchadnezzar would have never known about God. These young Jewish men might have thought that their choices to follow God were only about God and them but the reality was that others were watching and learning. If they had failed to declare the truth of God, others would have never heard.

- What are your convictions about remaining loyal to God even when it threatens to cost you personally?
- Are there any situations right now where you have the choice to live by God's truth boldly and declare the gospel to others but feel hesitant?
- Read Mark 8:34-38
- How does this passage from Mark and what we have studied in Daniel so far encourage you to act in certain situations in your own life?
- Are you willing to speak and live out the gospel so that others can hear and believe?

Time to Ponder

- Read and meditate on Romans 10:14-17
- Write out one way that this passage challenges or encourages you as read it today.
- Write down one conviction that you can either make or renew in your life based on this study.

The Most High - Day 16

Daniel 4:1-3

¹ ^[a] King Nebuchadnezzar,

To the nations and peoples of every language, who live in all the earth:

May you prosper greatly!

² It is my pleasure to tell you about the miraculous signs and wonders that the Most High God has performed for me.

³ How great are his signs,
how mighty his wonders!

His kingdom is an eternal kingdom;

his dominion endures from generation to generation.

I recently saw a commercial that was promoting the cause of animal rights; in particular it was highlighting the proper treatment of dogs. That was probably not that unusual except that in this commercial there was a celebrity spokesperson. Again, this aspect was also not all that unusual in and of itself. But this particular spokesperson was highly unusual. It was Michael Vick. You may not know who that is but Michael Vick is an extremely successful NFL quarterback who nearly lost his career several years ago after being caught up in a ring of dog fighting. Vick spent nearly two years in jail for that and was out of the NFL for that time, losing around 100 million dollars in salary and endorsements. The former superstar received an incredible amount of criticism and protest for his brutal and gruesome activities with dogs but he was truly humbled in prison. He lost virtually everything. After being released, he has had the opportunity to rebuild his career and is a better player than he was before, not in small part because of the humility he learned. Not only that, but he has now become a spokesperson for treating animals kindly and humanely. Vick has become so humbled that he has now become an advocate for something that he once worked against.

- Why do you think that true humility is such a difficult thing for human beings to learn?
- All humans struggle with pride in different ways. How do you tend to struggle with pride in your life?
- Read James 4:4-6
- Why do you think that James connected friendship with the world with God opposing the proud and giving grace to the humble?

If nothing else becomes clear in reading the first four chapters of Daniel it would be that Nebuchadnezzar was full of pride and thought that he was greater than God. He was constantly opposing God by thinking that he was the one that was sovereign over his own destiny rather than God. As we will see, however, something rather incredible happens to Nebuchadnezzar in this chapter that will finally humble him before God once and for all. As a result of that, it is Nebuchadnezzar who actually wrote this fourth chapter of the book of Daniel as a bit of an admission of his previous fight against God.

One of the clearest signs of the King's new-found humility that we will find throughout the fourth chapter is his use of the phrase "the Most High" in reference to God.

Referring to God as the Most High meant that the King was recognizing that God was the one who was sovereign over the heavens and the earth.

Interestingly, we find that same phrase used in Isaiah 14:12-15, a prophecy against the King of Babylon. In that passage, the King of Babylon is being described in language that symbolically connects him with Satan but that describes his desire to have the power and sovereignty of the Most High God. This passage in Isaiah very likely referred to Nebuchadnezzar who desired to be the most high. Notice that he didn't desire to be merciful, or loving, or full of redemption like God, only that he desired his power and sovereignty. He wanted to be the ruler of his own destiny and the world. He wanted to do his own will rather than God's. And it would take an incredibly humbling set of circumstances to help him to see things clearly.

- Do you ever struggle with the desire to do your own will rather than God's?
- Why is it so difficult to lay down our own will in favor of God's?
- Read Genesis 3:1-7 and Matthew 26:36-39
- In both scenes we find people in gardens wrestling with doing God's will. What is the difference in outcome between these two scenes?
- What can we learn from these two scenes to apply to our own lives as we seek to do God's will rather than trying to do our own will and be the Most High of our own lives

Time to Ponder

- Read and meditate on James 4:7-10
- Write out one way that this passage challenges you as read it today.
- Write down one conviction that you can either make or renew in your life based on this study.

A Slow Burn - Day 17

Daniel 4:4-18

⁴ I, Nebuchadnezzar, was at home in my palace, contented and prosperous. ⁵ I had a dream that made me afraid. As I was lying in bed, the images and visions that passed through my mind terrified me. ⁶ So I commanded that all the wise men of Babylon be brought before me to interpret the dream for me. ⁷ When the magicians, enchanters, astrologers^[a] and diviners came, I told them the dream, but they could not interpret it for me. ⁸ Finally, Daniel came into my presence and I told him the dream. (He is called Belteshazzar, after the name of my god, and the spirit of the holy gods is in him.)

⁹ I said, "Belteshazzar, chief of the magicians, I know that the spirit of the holy gods is in you, and no mystery is too difficult for you. Here is my dream; interpret it for me." ¹⁰ These are the visions I saw while lying in bed: I looked, and there before me stood a tree in the middle of the land. Its height was enormous. ¹¹ The tree grew large and strong and its top touched the sky; it was visible to the ends of the earth. ¹² Its leaves were beautiful, its fruit abundant, and on it was food for all. Under it the wild animals found shelter, and the birds lived in its branches; from it every creature was fed.

¹³ "In the visions I saw while lying in bed, I looked, and there before me was a holy one, a messenger,^[a] coming down from heaven. ¹⁴ He called in a loud voice: 'Cut down the tree and trim off its branches; strip off its leaves and scatter its fruit. Let the animals flee from under it and the birds from its branches. ¹⁵ But let the stump and its roots, bound with iron and bronze, remain in the ground, in the grass of the field.

"Let him be drenched with the dew of heaven, and let him live with the animals among the plants of the earth. ¹⁶ Let his mind be changed from that of a man and let him be given the mind of an animal, till seven times^[a] pass by for him.

¹⁷ "The decision is announced by messengers, the holy ones declare the verdict, so that the living may know that the Most High is sovereign over all kingdoms on earth and gives them to anyone he wishes and sets over them the lowliest of people.'

¹⁸ "This is the dream that I, King Nebuchadnezzar, had. Now, Belteshazzar, tell me what it means, for none of the wise men in my kingdom can interpret it for me. But you can, because the spirit of the holy gods is in you."

I was not a disciple of Jesus Christ when I was in college although I have often wished that I had been. The campus ministries look like they have so much fun and are so focused on bringing glory to God that I wished I hadn't wasted so much time in college. I know many people who were disciples in college, though, and they look back with great fondness on those times as they were used by God to do many incredible things and help large numbers of people come to the family of Christ.

As incredible and exciting as those times were, they sometimes struggle with those memories now. It's not that they regret what they were part of but they feel bad that now that they are older or married and have kids, it doesn't seem like God is using them in the same exciting ways. They don't have a new friend that wants to study the Bible each week or help someone to get baptized routinely. They are engaged in the much slower process of influencing their neighbors and co-workers to bring them to Christ. They often feel engulfed in the demands of life as an employee, a spouse, a parent, and all of their other roles and it seems sometimes like few notice and no one cares too much about listening to them as it pertains to the gospel. We want fast and exciting results not a slow and steady pace. Can you relate to that at all?

- Do you ever get frustrated because you are not having the results for God's Kingdom?
- How does that make you feel?

- Do you ever feel somehow that you are not being effective or not being a very “good” disciple based on the visible results of your evangelism?
- Read Colossians 3:3
- If we are hidden in Christ, who does God see when he looks at us? What is our identity?
- We need to remember that our identity is based solely on being in Christ. It is about where we are not what we do.

It is easy to see how Daniel could have become easily frustrated and maybe even thought that God was no longer with him. He had experienced some incredible moments of faith and victory with the King before and been advanced greatly but now the King has another dream and he didn't even go to Daniel first. The King still went to his sorcerers and enchanterers to see what they thought. Daniel must have wondered if he was doing any good at all. Nebuchadnezzar had come to some great revelations about God but he still had not committed himself fully.

Yet, Nebuchadnezzar had been paying attention. Daniel may not have been the first person he went to but he had clearly been influenced by Daniel. He did not fully understand God but he knew that something was different about Daniel. He didn't understand the dream that he had but he knew somehow that God was with Daniel and so Daniel could help him. Daniel hadn't yet had any exciting breakthroughs with the King but he had had a quiet influence through the sincerity and truth of his life.

That's the challenge for us sometimes. We have to trust God that living a quiet and godly life is what pleases God. Yes, we have to be ready to boldly speak God's word when given the opportunity but there are often times in life where our impact on others will come from the humdrum of daily living and coming to a position of influence in the lives of others. Daniel's influence with the King would help to eventually bring about his repentance but it took a long time.

- Read 1 Peter 2:11-17
- What are some of the practical challenges of living lives of godly influence? How can that be difficult?
- What are some of the ways that Satan can tempt us to think incorrectly about the slow process of living lives of godly influence?
- Are you active in sharing your faith in the opportunities that the Holy Spirit lays before you?
- Just as importantly, are you patient and faithful about gaining influence in the lives of your friends and neighbors through consistent and godly living?

Time to Ponder

- Read and meditate on John 13:34-35 as it relates to today's topic.
- Write out one way that this passage challenges you as read it today.
- Write down one conviction that you can either make or renew in your life based on this study.

The Hard Way - Day 18

Daniel 4:19-27

¹⁹ Then Daniel (also called Belteshazzar) was greatly perplexed for a time, and his thoughts terrified him. So the king said, “Belteshazzar, do not let the dream or its meaning alarm you.”

Belteshazzar answered, “My lord, if only the dream applied to your enemies and its meaning to your adversaries!” ²⁰ The tree you saw, which grew large and strong, with its top touching the sky, visible to the whole earth, ²¹ with beautiful leaves and abundant fruit, providing food for all, giving shelter to the wild animals, and having nesting places in its branches for the birds— ²² Your Majesty, you are that tree! You have become great and strong; your greatness has grown until it reaches the sky, and your dominion extends to distant parts of the earth.

²³ “Your Majesty saw a holy one, a messenger, coming down from heaven and saying, ‘Cut down the tree and destroy it, but leave the stump, bound with iron and bronze, in the grass of the field, while its roots remain in the ground. Let him be drenched with the dew of heaven; let him live with the wild animals, until seven times pass by for him.’

²⁴ “This is the interpretation, Your Majesty, and this is the decree the Most High has issued against my lord the king: ²⁵ You will be driven away from people and will live with the wild animals; you will eat grass like the ox and be drenched with the dew of heaven. Seven times will pass by for you until you acknowledge that the Most High is sovereign over all kingdoms on earth and gives them to anyone he wishes. ²⁶ The command to leave the stump of the tree with its roots means that your kingdom will be restored to you when you acknowledge that Heaven rules. ²⁷ Therefore, Your Majesty, be pleased to accept my advice: Renounce your sins by doing what is right, and your wickedness by being kind to the oppressed. It may be that then your prosperity will continue.”

No one likes to lose very much. I never liked losing as I was growing up, especially in sports. As I became an adult and a coach I didn't really like it very much either but I have come to appreciate losing over the years. As distasteful as losing can be I realized that we can learn far more through one loss than we can through a hundred wins. As a basketball coach, I used to tell my players that all of the time that losses expose your weaknesses and show you where you need to grow. Success and victories can cover that up and you're so happy from winning that you just don't learn from wins very often.

- Think back to some times of loss or failure in your own life.
- What valuable lessons did you learn during that time?
- Do you see those times of loss, struggle, or failure as purely negative or do you view them as opportunities to grow and learn?

Nebuchadnezzar, it is fairly safe to assume, didn't experience very much failure throughout his life. He was arguably the most powerful man in the world during his reign. The problem was that he had long believed his own hype. He really thought that he was something. He truly believed that he could control his own future and was sovereign over the world that he largely controlled.

He never stopped to think about the fact that he was having these dreams that he could not understand and that was a sign in and of itself that he was not in control of all things. He forgot the lesson of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego with the fiery furnace that he was not in control of everything. He had ignored Daniel's interpretation of his statue dream and the accompanying lesson that the King was great but his kingdom would eventually give way to others. He failed to learn those lessons because he never personally lost or went through trials. Success insulates us from reality and causes us to think that things are better than they often really are.

But now he has had another dream that Daniel must interpret for him. The message of this dream should have been truly humbling. It confirmed that he was great and powerful but he had failed to properly acknowledge the sovereignty of God and that would prove to be his undoing. He would be stripped of the ability to rule his kingdom and would be humbled in the most extreme way possible, by living as a wild animal. Only when he learned from this great loss and recognized that God was sovereign over his life and kingdom would Nebuchadnezzar be restored.

- Read James 1:2-4
- What role in our life does James say that tough times can play?
- Do you let struggles get you down and defeat you or do you real see them as an opportunity for joy?
- What is the knowledge that James says will change trials from being negative to being pure joy?

Through this dream God had given Nebuchadnezzar another opportunity to recognize God as the Most High but as we will see, he failed to do that. Daniel took the incredibly bold step of warning the King and pleaded with him to renounce his sin and do what was right. God often gives us struggles and various other things like that so that we can have the opportunity to humble ourselves before him. When we don't, however, we run the risk that Nebuchadnezzar took. He refused to be humbled by God's warning and he would have to go through this time of great loss. In other words, he was going to have to learn things the hard way.

- Read Romans 5:1-5
- What can you learn from this passage in addition to the previous passage in James?

Time to Ponder

- Read and meditate on 2 Corinthians 4:7-12.
- Write out one way that this passage challenges you as read it today.
- Write down one conviction that you can either make or renew in your life based on this study.

Mirror or Canvas? - Day 19

Daniel 4:28-33

²⁸ All this happened to King Nebuchadnezzar. ²⁹ Twelve months later, as the king was walking on the roof of the royal palace of Babylon, ³⁰ he said, “Is not this the great Babylon I have built as the royal residence, by my mighty power and for the glory of my majesty?”

³¹ Even as the words were on his lips, a voice came from heaven, “This is what is decreed for you, King Nebuchadnezzar: Your royal authority has been taken from you. ³² You will be driven away from people and will live with the wild animals; you will eat grass like the ox. Seven times will pass by for you until you acknowledge that the Most High is sovereign over all kingdoms on earth and gives them to anyone he wishes.”

³³ Immediately what had been said about Nebuchadnezzar was fulfilled. He was driven away from people and ate grass like the ox. His body was drenched with the dew of heaven until his hair grew like the feathers of an eagle and his nails like the claws of a bird.

Have you ever used a mirror before? I'd be willing to bet that you have. In fact, it would be a little weird if you had never used one. But have you ever stopped to think about what the purpose of a mirror actually is? Of course, the answer is so obvious that we don't even think about it much. Mirrors were made to reflect images weren't they? You don't install a mirror in your house so that you can paint on it or write notes or keep your weekly calendar. You have a mirror for the purpose of seeing your image reflected. Using a mirror for anything else as a primary purpose would be to waste and even potentially ruin the mirror.

In a similar manner, God created human beings to bear his image according to Genesis 1:26-27. The word that is translated “image” literally means “idol” or “representative.” It means that God created human beings to represent him or to reflect his will and rule into the created world. Our created purpose as human beings, then, is to do God's will in the world but humans quickly rebelled against that by doing our own will. That means that we began to paint our own wills on our lives as though we are canvasses rather than mirrors that were made to reflect God's image.

- Can you think of specific times when you know what God's will is but you chose instead to do your own will?
- How does it inform your thinking of the need to do God's will if we rightly define sin as “doing your own will rather than God's”?
- Read Mark 3:34-35
- Who does Jesus say is part of his family?
- What does that mean for those that don't do God's will?

Nebuchadnezzar had been fairly warned that God would humble him if he didn't humble himself before God. Yet, a year had gone by and nothing had happened and so he began to feel safe and in control of things again. That often happens to humans. Something happens that sobers us or causes us concern but then time makes the reality of that concern fade in our minds and we drift right back to where we were.

Daniel had warned Nebuchadnezzar that God would make him like a beast if he didn't recognize God's sovereignty. That makes sense because animals are created to survive and to look out for their own interests. Humans were created to reflect God's image and look out for the interests of his creation. When we seek our own self-interest and put ourselves first, we are acting more like beasts than like what God created us to be. Putting ourselves first actually strips us of our created purpose as humans and dehumanizes us and those around us as we begin to treat others like commodities that can either be of benefit to us or not.

As the King strolled around and looked at his kingdom he became rather impressed with all that he had done. He was seeing Babylon for what it could do for him and his greatness rather than recognizing that God had given him his position and that it was his created purpose to do God's will with what he had rather than his own.

- Read Romans 12:1-2
- How do we prepare ourselves to do God's will according to this passage?
- Are you truly a living (meaning ongoing) sacrifice?
- What does that really mean in your life personally to be an ongoing sacrifice?
- What are some of the areas in which you struggle with doing God's will over your own?

Because of his unrepentant pride and his commitment to doing his own will, the King would be humbled for seven times (there is some debate as to whether this referred to seven months or seven years, but it doesn't really matter for our purposes here). God showed Nebuchadnezzar in full, living color what human beings become when they don't properly acknowledge God and seek his will. We begin to act like beasts that look out for only our own self-interests. Imagine how Nebuchadnezzar's experience would have been different had he humbled himself to recognize the sovereignty of God. It makes a big difference whether we view ourselves as a canvas and try to paint our own wills onto our lives or recognize that we are mirrors, created to reflect God's will.

Time to Ponder

- Read and meditate on Matthew 26:39. What would have happened if Jesus had not done the Father's will in this moment?
- Write out one way that this passage challenges you as you read it today.
- Write down one conviction that you can either make or renew in your life based on this study.

My God, Not Just Yours - Day 20

Daniel 4:34-37

³⁴ At the end of that time, I, Nebuchadnezzar, raised my eyes toward heaven, and my sanity was restored. Then I praised the Most High; I honored and glorified him who lives forever.

His dominion is an eternal dominion;
his kingdom endures from generation to generation.

³⁵ All the peoples of the earth
are regarded as nothing.

He does as he pleases
with the powers of heaven
and the peoples of the earth.

No one can hold back his hand
or say to him: "What have you done?"

³⁶ At the same time that my sanity was restored, my honor and splendor were returned to me for the glory of my kingdom. My advisers and nobles sought me out, and I was restored to my throne and became even greater than before. ³⁷ Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and exalt and glorify the King of heaven, because everything he does is right and all his ways are just. And those who walk in pride he is able to humble.

Taking ownership in something is an interesting behavior amongst human beings. I'm not quite sure how certain people determine what their town, or their team, or their church is but once people take ownership in something and view it as their own, it is powerful. There is a big difference between something being yours and it being mine. In fact, I have seen that phenomenon playing out with young people a lot when it comes to God. It is one thing for God to be their parent's God and for faith to be their parent's faith but it is an entirely different animal when God becomes their God and their faith is their own.

Can you identify with that at all? Have you ever lived in a town that you didn't really feel like was home? Have you ever worked at a place that really didn't feel like you had a personal investment in? Have you ever gone to church but mostly because you were going through the motions and not because you really felt that it was truly your family of faith? Have you ever felt like the walk you have with God more relies on the faith of those around you than in your own genuine and deep faith?

- Take some time to reflect on the last two questions asked above? What is your answer? If you answered "yes," were those times in the past or are you currently feeling that way?
- If it was in the past, what changed the situation for you? If you are going through that right now, what do you need to do to change that situation? Have you been open with others about your feelings? Have you sincerely turned to God and asked for help?
- Read Psalm 31:14-24
- How could this Psalm direct those who aren't feeling connected to God?

Nebuchadnezzar had already had several opportunities to recognize the power of God as the one who is truly sovereign over the universe. He had been impressed and amazed by God up to this point but only at a distance. Nebuchadnezzar had referred to God as Daniel's God (Dan. 2:47) and the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego (3:28) but he had never embraced God as his own. He was willing to be amazed and the great and mighty ability of Israel's God but he never truly humbled himself before God and recognized that the Most High was sovereign over the world and that Nebuchadnezzar, even though he was King of Babylon, was not.

Nebuchadnezzar finally recognized that God was not just mighty and impressive but that he was truly worthy of being praised, honored, and glorified by Nebuchadnezzar himself. The Most High God had finally become his own God based on his own understanding and faith. Nebuchadnezzar finally understood that it was God who determined when kingdoms would rise and fall. God was in charge and the King was not. The King had come to see that everything that he had was from God and it was God who was worthy of his praise and his devotion.

- Read Psalm 86
- How do the response of Nebuchadnezzar and the words of the Psalmist inspire us to regard God in our own lives?
- What can you learn from these two passages?

King Nebuchadnezzar had finally changed the object of his adoration from himself to the Most High God. Rather than exalting and regarding his own will as the most important thing in life, he now recognized God's will as supreme and the thing to be sought and followed. But what changed his mind? Why do you think it took so long for Nebuchadnezzar to be humbled? Even more importantly, how can we be much more like him than we would like to think?

Time to Ponder

- Read and meditate on James 4:10
- Write out one way that this passage challenges you as read it today.
- Write down one conviction that you can either make or renew in your life based on this study.

Those Other gods - Day 21

Daniel 5:1-4

¹ King Belshazzar gave a great banquet for a thousand of his nobles and drank wine with them. ² While Belshazzar was drinking his wine, he gave orders to bring in the gold and silver goblets that Nebuchadnezzar his father^[a] had taken from the temple in Jerusalem, so that the king and his nobles, his wives and his concubines might drink from them. ³ So they brought in the gold goblets that had been taken from the temple of God in Jerusalem, and the king and his nobles, his wives and his concubines drank from them. ⁴ As they drank the wine, they praised the gods of gold and silver, of bronze, iron, wood and stone.

Have you ever heard the phrase “it’s like the pot calling the kettle black”? The somewhat biting point of that old saying is that the pot is trying to somehow put down the kettle by pointing out that it is black, ignoring the fact that the pot is black itself. It’s a common phrase in our society because the concept of looking down on another for doing something all the while doing the very same or very similar things is all too present in our day. This is especially true when we look at ancient texts like this and see the blatant idolatry and rebellion against God that these people engaged in. It is easy for us to look down on them and wonder how they could be so bold. How could these people be so silly we wonder? But are they really any different from us?

- What is your definition of idolatry, in your own words?
- Why do you think that idolatry might have been so attractive in the ancient world?
- What are the primary forms of idolatry in our society today?
- Are there any forms of idolatry that have proven to be a temptation or snare for you?

King Belshazzar is an interesting figure in history. In the 19th century, critics of the Bible boldly declared that he was an invention of the biblical writers and had never existed in history. These claims seemed to deeply damage the credibility of the Bible because there was nothing in the secular historical record about Belshazzar. Then in 1854 a British archaeologist made a stunning discovery in Iraq. He found several inscriptions concerning the well known King Nabonidus and his son Belshazzar. The Bible had once again been proven to be completely accurate and reliable.

It appears that Nabonidus was the real King of Babylon at the time but he was an eccentric ruler who questioned the gods of Babylon and had his own gods that he worshipped. He spent most of his reign living in Teima rather than in Babylon and he made his son Belshazzar the effective king of Babylon for most of his reign.

Later in his reign, Nabonidus left with the Babylonian army to fight against Darius. He was defeated and fled to Borsippa where Darius penned him up. Darius then took much of his army and turned towards Babylon where Belshazzar was reigning in his father’s absence.

It stretches credibility to think that Belshazzar did not know all of this was going on. The events of Daniel 5 take place on the last night of his reign. Was this party an appeal to his gods for protection? It is quite probable that Belshazzar believed that to have a night of partying and revelry would please the gods and would save him from the apparent fate that was headed his way. In his ultimate act of devotion to the gods of Babylon he would pull out items from the Temple of Jerusalem and denigrate the God of Israel, the God that his predecessor Nebuchadnezzar (referred to by the common term “father” although Nabonidus was not an heir of Nebuchadnezzar, he was a successor) had come to worship.

As they drank and continued to pay homage to their gods, it is pointed out that these gods were made of nothing more than gold, silver, bronze, iron, wood, and stone. This is in stark contrast to the description that Nebuchadnezzar gave of the God Most High in the previous chapter.

Once again the question that has come to the forefront of Daniel is the sovereignty of God. Belshazzar obviously had no recognition of the true God as Daniel and Nebuchadnezzar had. He was even willing to demean the one, true God in his desire to appeal to and impress his gods. But these were gods that were made by human hands not the Most High God.

It is easy to look down on Belshazzar and think him to be so silly and ignorant. How could people truly give their time, their resources, their energy, and their devotion to things made by human hands? That really is, after all, the definition of idolatry. Our idols are the things that we give our time, trust, resources, energy, and devotion to. It is the things that we turn to when we are in need of comfort. Do we have our own man made gods and idols in our culture? We surely do. We have entertainment in its many forms, money, jobs, relationships, power, prestige, reputation, even our kids, and the list could go on and on. The fact is that we are just as prone to worshiping our own gods by putting them before the Most High in our lives as Belshazzar ever was.

- Read Deuteronomy 29:16-18
- Are there any idols in your life that have been put in front of God or that are keeping you from truly serving God with all of your heart, soul, mind, and strength? Really think about it and be honest with yourself.

Time to Ponder

- Read and meditate on 1 Peter 1:13-25
- Write out one way that this passage challenges you as read it today.
- Write down one conviction that you can either make or renew in your life based on this study.

Wild Goose Chase - Day 22

Daniel 5:5-9

⁵ Suddenly the fingers of a human hand appeared and wrote on the plaster of the wall, near the lampstand in the royal palace. The king watched the hand as it wrote. ⁶ His face turned pale and he was so frightened that his legs became weak and his knees were knocking.

⁷ The king summoned the enchanters, astrologers^[b] and diviners. Then he said to these wise men of Babylon, "Whoever reads this writing and tells me what it means will be clothed in purple and have a gold chain placed around his neck, and he will be made the third highest ruler in the kingdom."

⁸ Then all the king's wise men came in, but they could not read the writing or tell the king what it meant. ⁹ So King Belshazzar became even more terrified and his face grew more pale. His nobles were baffled.

Have you ever felt like you were on a wild goose chase? The term refers to a hopeless quest or a fruitless pursuit. I know I have been on a few in my life. In college we used to have quite a bit of fun with new freshmen by taking them out for a snipe hunt. If you don't know what a snipe hunt is, it is basically a phantom hunt that you take someone on which leaves them standing out in a field holding a bag for hours waiting for a creature that will never come.

Those kind of wild goose chases are typically good fun but we can certainly go on many wild goose chases in life that are much more serious. If we're not careful we can easily seek after things in life that are elusive at best and illusory at worst.

- What types of wild goose chases can people go on in our world today?
- What leads to someone chasing after something that they will probably never attain?
- What is the danger of a wild goose chase?

As King Belshazzar was holding this desperate feast to the gods in the face of the approaching army of Darius, fingers and what looked like a human hand appeared and began to write on the wall. This doesn't mean that the fingers were human but simply that they appeared as a human hand would look. The obvious implication is that this was the divine fingers of God. That would make this the second time that God had manifested in some bodily form in the book of Daniel (the first time being in the fiery furnace of course).

References to the finger of God in the Bible are quite interesting. When the magicians of Egypt realized that Moses had performed miracles that were the real deal, miracles that exposed their attempts as phony, they attributed it to the finger of God. It was also the finger of God that was responsible for carving the true wisdom of God in the form of the Law on tablets at Mt. Sinai (Ex. 31:18; Deut. 9:10). It was God's Law that exposed all of the wisdom of man as mere pretense and counterfeit. Finally, long after the book of Daniel was written, Jesus pointed out that the finger of God was at work in his miracles

(Lk. 11:20), exposing all others as fake and confirming that his work really was from the genuine kingdom of God.

The point being made was that the words that were written on the wall were truly from God. This was not the invention of men. That means that the message on the wall was not the counterfeit wisdom of man, but the true wisdom that comes from God alone.

Yet, Belshazzar responded, once he got over his near collapse in fear, by following a similar pattern that Nebuchadnezzar had made familiar before God had finally humbled him. He turned to the enchanters, the astrologers, and the diviners. In other words, he turned to the wisdom of Babylon, the wisdom of the world rather than the wisdom of God. Once again, a stark contrast was drawn. The best that Babylon had to offer could not crack the wisdom that came directly from God's finger. They were simply at a loss. The kings of Babylon continued to exalt the wisdom of the world over that of God and they would continue to pay a dear price for their fruitless pursuit of the wrong kind of wisdom. Before finding the truth, Belshazzar was going to go on a wild goose chase.

- Read 1 Corinthians 1:20-25
- What is the distinction that Paul makes between the wisdom of the world and the wisdom of God?
- Closely examine your own life. Are there any areas in which you have sought or bought into the wisdom of the world without truly pursuing God's wisdom in that area?
- What is the danger in your own life of seeking after the wisdom of the world?

Time to Ponder

- Read and meditate on 1 Corinthians 3:19-20
- Write out one way that this passage challenges you as read it today.
- Write down one conviction that you can either make or renew in your life based on this study.

To Be Seen Or Not? - Day 23

Daniel 5:10-17

¹⁰ The queen,^[9] hearing the voices of the king and his nobles, came into the banquet hall. "May the king live forever!" she said. "Don't be alarmed! Don't look so pale!" ¹¹ There is a man in your kingdom who has the spirit of the holy gods in him. In the time of your father he was found to have insight and intelligence and wisdom like that of the gods. Your father, King Nebuchadnezzar, appointed him chief of the magicians, enchanters, astrologers and diviners. ¹² He did this because Daniel, whom the king called Belteshazzar, was found to have a keen mind and knowledge and understanding, and also the ability to interpret dreams, explain riddles and solve difficult problems. Call for Daniel, and he will tell you what the writing means."

¹³ So Daniel was brought before the king, and the king said to him, "Are you Daniel, one of the exiles my father the king brought from Judah?" ¹⁴ I have heard that the spirit of the gods is in you and that you have insight, intelligence and outstanding wisdom. ¹⁵ The wise men and enchanters were brought before me to read this writing and tell me what it means, but they could not explain it. ¹⁶ Now I have heard that you are able to give interpretations and to solve difficult problems. If you can read this writing and tell me what it means, you will be clothed in purple and have a gold chain placed around your neck, and you will be made the third highest ruler in the kingdom."

¹⁷ Then Daniel answered the king, "You may keep your gifts for yourself and give your rewards to someone else. Nevertheless, I will read the writing for the king and tell him what it means."

There are lots of people in our world that spend a considerable amount of time trying to poke holes and find contradictions in the Bible. This seems to me to be a rather fruitless task that hasn't gained much ground in two thousand years but they continue to try. One set of passages that some point to as a contradiction of ideas, though, is Matthew 5:16 and Matthew 6:1. In Matthew 5:16, Jesus says that his people should "let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven." But then in Matthew 6:1, Jesus says "Be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven."

So which is it, the critics will ask smugly. Did Jesus want people to do things to be seen or did he want them to do them privately? How would you explain this apparent contradiction?

- Why would Jesus encourage people to do good deeds so that they may be seen and God be glorified?
- Why would he also encourage people to not do good works to be seen by men?
- What is your explanation for these two seemingly contrasting set of directions?

Belshazzar was throwing a feast to appeal to the gods and try to get one to listen. Much to his surprise, one did. In fact, the only God who could listen had heard and sent him a

message. He had appealed to the wisdom of the world, but they were made to look foolish in the face of God's wisdom as the world's wisdom always is.

The queen (most likely the queen mother) knew of Daniel from the time of Nebuchadnezzar, however. She knew that there was something special about him. She had seen Daniel do amazing things through the power of God and was willing to speak up for him. Belshazzar had had no interest in summoning Daniel or appealing to the God of Daniel and Nebuchadnezzar but now an opportunity was opening because Daniel had done great things for God so that others could see. Yet, as we look back on the previous chapters, it is clear that everything Daniel did he did for the glory and advancement of God, not so that he could be seen and noticed by men, or even be promoted or advanced. His sole motivation was God's glory.

- Read 1 Timothy 5:25
- Do you ever feel like you get tired in doing good deeds if other people don't notice?
- Why do you engage in good works? What is your motivation? Take some time to really reflect on that.
- If no one other than God ever knew about some of the godly deeds that you do would you continue to do them? Would you struggle with feeling unappreciated?

Daniel had lived a life of godliness and good deeds with rather uneven notice in the eyes of men. Sometimes people noticed and God was glorified and at other times his life seemed to go quite unnoticed. In verse 13, King Belshazzar actually asks Daniel if he was one of the children of the exile (the NIV removes "children") which was somewhat of an intentional slight in that context. Belshazzar knew nothing of Daniel and wasn't impressed by all of the good and godly things that he had done for Babylon. But he was also desperate and willing to give Daniel a shot.

In fact, Belshazzar was willing to give Daniel the third highest position in the kingdom (behind him and his father) if he could decipher this divine message and help him out. Daniel was not interested, though, in being rewarded. Why not? The answer lies in the seeming contradiction of those two Matthew passages. Notice that Jesus never says that we are to make sure that others don't see our good deeds. What he said was that we should not do them in order to be seen. It is all about our motivation. We are to do good works to bring glory to God rather than to be seen by men. If we are never noticed in what we do then that is fine, but we shouldn't hide our works, rather when men do notice we should make sure that the glory goes to God not us. That's what Daniel always did.

Time to Ponder

- Read and meditate on Ephesians 2:10
- Write out one way that this passage challenges you as read it today.
- Write down one conviction that you can either make or renew in your life based on this study.

A Bad Example - Day 24

Daniel 5:18-24

¹⁸ “Your Majesty, the Most High God gave your father Nebuchadnezzar sovereignty and greatness and glory and splendor. ¹⁹ Because of the high position he gave him, all the nations and peoples of every language dreaded and feared him. Those the king wanted to put to death, he put to death; those he wanted to spare, he spared; those he wanted to promote, he promoted; and those he wanted to humble, he humbled. ²⁰ But when his heart became arrogant and hardened with pride, he was deposed from his royal throne and stripped of his glory. ²¹ He was driven away from people and given the mind of an animal; he lived with the wild donkeys and ate grass like the ox; and his body was drenched with the dew of heaven, until he acknowledged that the Most High God is sovereign over all kingdoms on earth and sets over them anyone he wishes.

²² “But you, Belshazzar, his son,⁽¹⁾ have not humbled yourself, though you knew all this. ²³ Instead, you have set yourself up against the Lord of heaven. You had the goblets from his temple brought to you, and you and your nobles, your wives and your concubines drank wine from them. You praised the gods of silver and gold, of bronze, iron, wood and stone, which cannot see or hear or understand. But you did not honor the God who holds in his hand your life and all your ways. ²⁴ Therefore he sent the hand that wrote the inscription.

When I was a kid there was an extremely popular series of commercials that ran for the Gatorade Company based on the little jingle “like Mike, if I could be like Mike.” The whole point of the ads was that people should want to drink Gatorade because Michael Jordan drank it. He was without a doubt the best basketball player in the world at the time so it would only make sense that people would want to follow his example and drink the energy drink. The implication was that drinking it would make you a better athlete. The slogan worked and Gatorade went from being a rather marginal product that only serious athletes used to being one of the most popular drinks in all of the United States and the world.

As human beings, we seem to prosper when we follow a good example or have a mentor. In fact, one could argue that we almost seem designed to operate best in that way. It is important, then, to follow the right examples and have the right influence in our lives, but so often humans tend to ignore the proper examples and instead follow after unhealthy role models.

- What sort of spiritual examples did you have in your life growing up?
- Did they help you to develop good spiritual habits?
- Read Deuteronomy 6:4-9
- What sort of spiritual example are you for your children or those around you? Are you teaching them good spiritual habits?
- What is the first thing that this passage calls people to do before they teach spiritual truths and set an example themselves?

We finally find out a bit more in this passage about what went wrong with Belshazzar. It wasn't that he was ignorant of all that had had happened with Nebuchadnezzar and his

turning to the Most High God. It wasn't that he didn't know of Daniel. It was that he chose to ignore all of that. Belshazzar had grown up with the tales of Nebuchadnezzar (and had possibly even known him) his whole life. He could have and should have followed that as an example for his life but he chose another path. We aren't told specifically what that path was, but we do know that his father Nabonidus was a devoted pagan worshipper of the moon god so it seems likely that Belshazzar followed his example in many ways.

Daniel's implication was that Belshazzar had many opportunities to learn from Nebuchadnezzar's example and to humble himself but he patently refused. Rather than learning from the humbling experiences of Nebuchadnezzar, Belshazzar chose to set himself up against the Lord of heaven. He chose the wrong examples to imitate. But this was not something that he could blame on someone else. Even if he received bad examples while growing up, it was entirely his choice to continue to reject God and follow these bad examples rather than the positive ones that were available to him.

- Read 1 Corinthians 10:1-11 (see also Hebrews 4:11)
- What role do the Old Testament accounts continue to have in the life of a believer according to Paul in this passage?
- As Christians the negative happenings in the Old Testament can serve as great examples for us of what to avoid and what to watch for in our lives but what can we use as positive examples in our lives?
- Read 1 Corinthians 4:16; Philippians 3:17; 1 Thessalonians 3:7; 2 Thessalonians 3:9; Hebrews 6:12; 13:7; 1 Peter 2:21
- What do these passages teach us about the Christian ethic of following wise examples, imitating others, and being worthy of imitation?

Time to Ponder

- Read and meditate on 3 John 1:11
- Write out one way that this passage challenges you as read it today.
- Write down one conviction that you can either make or renew in your life based on this study.

Weighed & Measured - Day 25

Daniel 5:25-31

²⁵ "This is the inscription that was written:

MENE, MENE, TEKEL, PARSIN

²⁶ "Here is what these words mean:

Mene^[e]: God has numbered the days of your reign and brought it to an end.

²⁷ *Teke*^[l]: You have been weighed on the scales and found wanting.

²⁸ *Peres*^[e]: Your kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and Persians."

²⁹ Then at Belshazzar's command, Daniel was clothed in purple, a gold chain was placed around his neck, and he was proclaimed the third highest ruler in the kingdom.

³⁰ That very night Belshazzar, king of the Babylonians,^[u] was slain,³¹ and Darius the Mede took over the kingdom, at the age of sixty-two.^[u]

I recently saw a television show where the boss of a major industry in the United States travelled around to different locations within his company doing different jobs. The catch was that he was in disguise and no one knew that the CEO of the company was among them watching them and working with them. While doing this he met one young lady who was a hard worker but was struggling with massive amounts of debt and her job simply didn't pay her enough to ever realistically think that she could pay that debt off. After spending a day with her the boss was so impressed by her work ethic and spirit that she brought to his company that a week later he brought her into his office and revealed to her that he was actually the CEO and not some bumbling guy on his first day on the job. He thanked her for her faithful service to his company and then said that he would like to help her out by paying off all of her debts. She was understandably overwhelmed with gratitude.

- What does it feel like to be in a situation that you cannot get out on your own?
- Read Romans 3:10-20
- What important truth does this passage remind us of?
- How does reading this passage make you feel as you consider it?

Belshazzar knew that he was in trouble with the armies of Darius pressing down upon his kingdom but he still had refused to humble himself before the one to whom he was ultimately answerable. God, however, had reminded him in spectacular fashion that he was sovereign. Belshazzar had insulted the God of Israel by pulling out items from his Temple and using them to appeal to other Gods and now God had a message for him. The only thing that was still lacking was that Belshazzar was yet to know what the message meant. In this passage, Daniel finally tells him.

The message was to the point and stark. Belshazzar's days had been numbered. He had been weighed and considered by God and found to be too light and now his kingdom was going to be given to someone who could presumably handle the load. In a strangely empty move, Belshazzar declared Daniel to be the third highest in the kingdom, demonstrating that he still didn't understand the gravity of what was going on around him.

What happened to Belshazzar, though, is a serious reminder for us. So many people in our world go through life as though we are not being measured by God. We go about our lives and make decisions based on what we would like to do with little consideration for God's will. This can even be true for many Christians. That is why the writer of James urged his readers to stop living each day for themselves as though they were not being numbered and measured by God and to start living each moment in view of God's will.

- Read James 4:13-17
- In what ways can you identify with the mindset that James describes in verse 13?
- He goes on to say that it is the Lord's will that should determine our every movement rather than our own will.
- How does that challenge you?
- Can you truly say that God's will is the primary determining factor in every decision you make?

Let's take a moment to put things in perspective and consider something encouraging. Belshazzar's sad story reminds us that we all stand on God's scales and will be measured. This can be a scary thing when we read passages like Romans 3:10-20 because it reminds us that none of us will be found heavy enough. We will all be found wanting. All of the things that make us feel so important will add up to nothing one day. That is why we should never read Romans 3:10-20 without continuing on and reading Romans 3:21-26. It reminds us of the great truth that we did indeed have a debt that we could never pay but that Jesus has stepped in and paid it for us.

- Read Philippians 3:4-14
- What did Paul learn to put his confidence in?
- What did he learn that was profitless when it came to standing before God?
- Read Colossians 3:3
- Take some time to reflect on the fact that we are hidden in Christ which means that when God puts us on his scales, we will be weighed according to Christ's account.

Time to Ponder

- Read and meditate on 2 Corinthians 5:21
- Write out one way that this passage challenges you as read it today.
- Write down one conviction that you can either make or renew in your life based on this study.

Nothing Bad to Say - Day 26

Daniel 6:1-5

¹ It pleased Darius to appoint 120 satraps to rule throughout the kingdom, ² with three administrators over them, one of whom was Daniel. The satraps were made accountable to them so that the king might not suffer loss. ³ Now Daniel so distinguished himself among the administrators and the satraps by his exceptional qualities that the king planned to set him over the whole kingdom. ⁴ At this, the administrators and the satraps tried to find grounds for charges against Daniel in his conduct of government affairs, but they were unable to do so. They could find no corruption in him, because he was trustworthy and neither corrupt nor negligent. ⁵ Finally these men said, "We will never find any basis for charges against this man Daniel unless it has something to do with the law of his God."

One of the great questions that probably nearly every preacher has asked of his hearers at one time or another goes something like "If you were being observed by your friends, family, and neighbors could they convict you of being a Christian." It really is a great question for Christians to ponder. Our words are one thing but what about our actions day in and day out? What if we were to take away those times that you gathered at a church building with others Christians or for specific meetings? If someone were to observe your actions during the rest of the week what would they see? Would they see someone that walked in the light and was blameless before men or would they see something else?

- Read 1 Peter 2:11-12
- Why does Peter stress the importance of living such a good life among the pagans?
- If you had to examine yourself, how well do you do at being a light to the unbelievers around you?
- Do you relax a little and live less like a Christian when you're not around believers or do you see the need even more to be righteous when around non-believers?

It appears from the historical record that Darius the Mede was quite possibly another name for Cyrus the Persian. Later in his reign, Darius would change his name to Cyrus. It is also quite probable that Daniel and Darius came to know each other years before Darius came to power in Babylon back when Daniel was representing Babylon to the empire of the Medes and Persians. This previous friendship between them was likely the reason that Darius would not have killed the third most powerful man in the land just behind Nabonidus and Belshazzar. Darius trusted Daniel and kept him around as one of his most valued advisors.

This was likely the cause of great jealousy among the satraps under Darius. Daniel had been given great opportunity and once again God prospered him. Rather than celebrating this, the satraps planned and plotted to take him out. You would think that it would not be too hard to trump up charges against someone if you really wanted to. But that is exactly where this plot ran into trouble.

Daniel was about 80 years old by the time of the events in this chapter so he was well known and had been around for a long time. But no one could come up with anything against him. They could find no wrongdoing. They could find not one example of corruption, negligence, laziness, or treason. Can you imagine a government official, working with that much power for their entire life and his opponents couldn't find one person to speak against them? That was the case for Daniel. He was so straight in his paths that they could not find so much as one shred of evidence to even trump up against him.

Because they could find nothing bad to charge Daniel with and they knew that he was so reverent and committed in his worship of Yahweh, they knew that this would be the way to trap him. They simply could not find anything to charge him with so they had to sink to using his devotion to God's law to ensnare him. Could the same be said of you?

- Read 1 Peter 2:13-17
- Is your life so consistent in your commitment to God's ways and the life of Christ that those who might oppose you could say nothing bad about you that was true?
- As you ponder that, what might you need to change in your behavior at work or in your neighborhood?
- What are the biggest pulls when you are at school or work to not act consistently righteously as you would want to?

Time to Ponder

- Read and meditate on Titus 2:7-8
- Write out one way that this passage challenges you as read it today.
- Write down one conviction that you can either make or renew in your life based on this study.

The Rock or the Sand? - Day 27

Daniel 6:6-9

⁶ So these administrators and satraps went as a group to the king and said: “May King Darius live forever! ⁷ The royal administrators, prefects, satraps, advisers and governors have all agreed that the king should issue an edict and enforce the decree that anyone who prays to any god or human being during the next thirty days, except to you, Your Majesty, shall be thrown into the lions’ den. ⁸ Now, Your Majesty, issue the decree and put it in writing so that it cannot be altered—in accordance with the law of the Medes and Persians, which cannot be repealed.” ⁹ So King Darius put the decree in writing.

I recently watched a documentary on professional athletes in the United States that had successful careers, earned millions of dollars through their playing days, but now are absolutely broke or even worse, in massive debt. How could such a thing happen? Some of that could be attributed to wasteful spending and riotous living but that actually accounts for a small portion of the problem. By far the leading cause among those athletes losing their fortunes in a relatively short period of time came through listening to the wrong people. Almost every one of them took horrible financial advice and wound up paying for it. In fact, upon further investigation it was revealed that many of these athletes had trusted individuals who had already proven themselves incapable or untrustworthy in financial matters. But they didn’t check their backgrounds well enough or just trusted the wrong influences that assured them that these people were reliable.

One of the most foolish things that people can do is to refuse to get input and advice from others. That usually demonstrates a pride that is often unwise and leads to disaster. But just as foolish as listening to no one is to listen to the wrong people. Many of the foolish things that we can do are a result from listening to the wrong voices or following the wrong wisdom. It is a good thing to base our decisions upon the rock of wise advice but it can be disastrous to try to build upon the sand of foolish counsel.

- Read Proverbs 11:14; 15:22; 24:6
- What do these passages all remind us about the need for wise counsel, good advice, and godly guidance?
- How open are you to getting constant input from a wise group of advisers?
- How do you go about choosing from whom you will seek advice and input?

This particular instance seems to have taken place during a particularly difficult time in Babylon. Nabonidus and Belshazzar had taken all of the gods and idols from around the empire and brought them into Babylon as protection against the impending doom of Darius’ armies. This left the entire country feeling that they were unprotected for a time as it took several months to complete the process of moving all of the statues and idols back to their pagan shrines from whence they came.

The satraps who were trying to ensnare Daniel took advantage of this. They knew that the nation felt vulnerable and had nothing to pray to so they appealed to Darius' sense of providing for his people. They advised him that it would be wise to require people to pray to him for the next thirty days so that no empty prayers would be offered to gods who were not in the temples and thus unable to hear their prayers. They evidently convinced Darius that this decree would be helping his people. They lied to the king and convinced him that all of the satraps and advisers agreed on this course of action which would have included Daniel. The king must have concluded that if Daniel agreed with this then it was the right course. But he apparently never actually checked with Daniel.

He had listened to the wrong advisers. He was hasty in his decision and went with a group of men that sounded good but were severely lacking in integrity and the wisdom of God. Because of his mistake in listening to the wrong advisers, Darius was about to learn an important lesson. The Medes and the Persians thought that they were so wise that once they made a law it could not be changed. But the folly of this law would become immediately apparent. Darius had listened to the wrong folks and would now find himself going up against the God who truly is the only one capable of making a law that cannot be repealed.

- Read Hebrews 13:17
- What important principle does this verse supply us with?
- Do you carefully consider someone's way of life from a godly perspective before seeking advice from them or imitating them?
- This passage doesn't mean that we should only seek out the wisdom of spiritual leaders, although they should certainly be a good source of it. This passage is urging us to carefully weigh out the sources of our input.
- Do you listen to or imitate those who do not truly build their lives on the foundation of God's word or do you seek biblically wise input on a regular basis?

In 1 Kings 12:1-17 we find an account of Rehoboam who listened to the wrong advisers. He had the wisdom of good advisers available, the elders of the kingdom, but instead he chose to listen to the appealing advice of his friends. Read through this passage and consider the outcome for Rehoboam. When we choose unwisely in our advisers, great trouble is likely to follow.

Time to Ponder

- Read and meditate on Matthew 7:24-27
- Write out one way that this passage challenges you as read it today.
- Write down one conviction that you can either make or renew in your life based on this study.

When the Going Gets Tough - Day 28

Daniel 6:10-16

¹⁰ Now when Daniel learned that the decree had been published, he went home to his upstairs room where the windows opened toward Jerusalem. Three times a day he got down on his knees and prayed, giving thanks to his God, just as he had done before. ¹¹ Then these men went as a group and found Daniel praying and asking God for help. ¹² So they went to the king and spoke to him about his royal decree: "Did you not publish a decree that during the next thirty days anyone who prays to any god or human being except to you, Your Majesty, would be thrown into the lions' den?"

The king answered, "The decree stands—in accordance with the law of the Medes and Persians, which cannot be repealed."

¹³ Then they said to the king, "Daniel, who is one of the exiles from Judah, pays no attention to you, Your Majesty, or to the decree you put in writing. He still prays three times a day." ¹⁴ When the king heard this, he was greatly distressed; he was determined to rescue Daniel and made every effort until sundown to save him.

¹⁵ Then the men went as a group to King Darius and said to him, "Remember, Your Majesty, that according to the law of the Medes and Persians no decree or edict that the king issues can be changed."

¹⁶ So the king gave the order, and they brought Daniel and threw him into the lions' den. The king said to Daniel, "May your God, whom you serve continually, rescue you!"

It seems these days that there is a new workout facility on nearly every street corner. These types of businesses have been around for a long time but they are really getting more and more popular every day. There are places where you can go and basically work out in a theater with a full-size movie screen playing in front of you. There are even many places you can go to work out 24 hours a day. But no matter how fancy or high-tech the facility is, success in working out regularly still comes down to one thing: Are you willing to keep working when it gets tough? There are many people who go for a short workout but they quit once they get tired or their muscles start burning. There are others who work out for a while but then they quit going as soon as life gets a little busy or working out is no longer fun. The reality is, though, that you will never truly get into a healthy condition that way. It is those that fight through the pain and persevere that will be successful in the long run.

- Take a look at your life and ask yourself if you see a pattern. Do you tend to want to quit when things get difficult or have you trained yourself to persevere through those things?
- Do you fight through the tough times and see them as opportunities or do you constantly complain to others and try to draw attention to yourself and your struggles?
- Read Hebrews 10:36
- Why do you think that the author feel that perseverance is so important?

Daniel certainly made it through some difficult events in his life and he had continued to be faithful to God and persevere through challenging times. Now in his old age he was

confronted by perhaps the most challenging situation of his entire life. Daniel had unwaveringly worshipped God his whole life and it had always worked out well for him but now he would face an even more intense trial.

Unable to trump up charges against him, the satraps convinced the King to declare a law that they knew would put Daniel in a tough spot. If he continued to worship God and pray to him daily as he had always done, then it would mean dire consequences for him. This was one of those situations that separate the men from the boys.

Daniel certainly would have seemingly had just cause in simply suspending his prayers for thirty days or going into secret with his prayers, but he refused. He knew that to fail to stand up and be a witness to the truth of the almighty God when things got tough would be to fail to stand up at all. If you cannot keep going when things get difficult then you will never be successful. Daniel continued to pray openly and boldly to his God, knowing that it could well cost him his life. When the trials came, Daniel trusted God more than his circumstances. He knew that doing right before God was far more important than retaining his position before men.

- Read Hebrews 11:32-40
- Why were these great examples of faith willing to suffer so much for the sake of God?
- What is your response when things get tough spiritually whether it be from the outside or within your own heart?
- Read James 1:2-4
- Why does James encourage joy in the face of trials?
- What is it that Christians are to “know” that will change trials from struggles to pure joy?

Perhaps Daniel thought that God would step up and deliver him from punishment for being faithful but no such reprieve seemed to be coming. Daniel was unceremoniously thrown into the lion’s den. How do you think he was feeling at that moment? What is your reaction when things seem to go badly because you are following God’s will rather than your own?

Time to Ponder

- Read and meditate on Revelation 2:10-11
- Write out one way that this passage challenges you as read it today.
- Write down one conviction that you can either make or renew in your life based on this study.

With You Always - Day 29

Daniel 6:17-23

¹⁷ A stone was brought and placed over the mouth of the den, and the king sealed it with his own signet ring and with the rings of his nobles, so that Daniel's situation might not be changed. ¹⁸ Then the king returned to his palace and spent the night without eating and without any entertainment being brought to him. And he could not sleep.

¹⁹ At the first light of dawn, the king got up and hurried to the lions' den. ²⁰ When he came near the den, he called to Daniel in an anguished voice, "Daniel, servant of the living God, has your God, whom you serve continually, been able to rescue you from the lions?"

²¹ Daniel answered, "May the king live forever! ²² My God sent his angel, and he shut the mouths of the lions. They have not hurt me, because I was found innocent in his sight. Nor have I ever done any wrong before you, Your Majesty."

²³ The king was overjoyed and gave orders to lift Daniel out of the den. And when Daniel was lifted from the den, no wound was found on him, because he had trusted in his God.

There is a great scene in the basketball movie *Hoosiers* when the small team of underdogs from the tiny town of Hickory is preparing to square off against the highly ranked school from the biggest city in their state for the state championship. As they arrived for the game, the players from Hickory were visibly intimidated by the huge and cavernous arena in which they were to play the championship game later that day. Then their coach did something brilliant. He pulled out a tape measure and had them measure the height of the basketball hoop and the length of the basketball court. He then told them that they would find that the dimensions of the playing court were exactly the same as they were in their home court in Hickory. The players immediately smiled and relaxed. He then prepared them with the mindset that they weren't really going to be playing in that huge stadium so they needn't worry. They were really going to be playing the game, at least in their minds, in the friendly confines of their tiny gym in Hickory.

It is so easy to get intimidated by the circumstances around us but we need to remind ourselves as Christians that when things seem too big for us, we have a God who is much bigger and more real than any of those circumstances.

- Read 1 Samuel 17:34-37
- David was facing one of the biggest and most intimidating giant problems imaginable but he was willing to go face him.
- What do we learn from this passage in regard to his willingness to face the giant?
- David learned to practice being in the presence of God and found God to be more real to him than the lion and the bear that he had faced before.
- He had also learned, through those situations, to trust God fully because God had helped him to overcome before
- When you face difficult times or your own "giants," what is your response?
- What can you learn from David's example?

Many people have heard this story of Daniel, Darius, and the lions over and over again since they were small children. This, along with stories like David and Goliath, has become a favorite in children's ministries over the years. I suppose that's a little strange because this is a very intense account that could have become rather grisly in a hurry. Yet, as many times as people have heard and read this story, I'll bet most people still think that when Daniel was pushed into the room that he entered directly into the presence of a fierce room of lions.

That is the usual understanding of this story but I think it misses the mark. Oh, it's true on a strictly physical level but that would be to miss the true point of this story. When Daniel was pushed through that doorway, he really entered into the presence of God. The presence of God was more real to him than was the presence of those lions. When the mouths of those lions were shut, Daniel was not particularly surprised, although he was certainly grateful, because he had spent a lifetime being in the presence of God and learning to see that as a far greater reality than the physical world around him. In fact, when Daniel discovered the facts about this decree, we are told in verse 10 that he went into God's presence just as he always had. Daniel was comfortable in the presence of God so when he was thrown into lion's den and faced a real challenge, he already knew the presence of God intimately.

- Read 2 Kings 6:13-17
- What truth did Elisha's servant need to learn that Daniel already knew?
- Do you try to develop God as a larger reality in your life than the things that you see?
- How can someone go about doing that?
- Are there any things in your life right now that seem more real or bigger than God?
- What do these passages from 2 Kings 6 and Daniel 6 encourage you to do specifically in your own life?

We may not face den full of lions or be surrounded by an enemy army but we face our own challenges and giants every day. The real trick is to know the presence of God so well that it becomes a greater reality to us than the things around us that we can see or touch. The important thing is for to know that this isn't just wishful thinking. We have a very important promise from God that through Jesus and the Holy Spirit, he will always be with us.

Time to Ponder

- Read and meditate on Matthew 28:20 (just as you did on day 14)
- Write out one way that this passage challenges you as read it today.
- Write down one conviction that you can either make or renew in your life based on this study.

Don't Quit - Day 30

Daniel 6:24-28

²⁴ At the king's command, the men who had falsely accused Daniel were brought in and thrown into the lions' den, along with their wives and children. And before they reached the floor of the den, the lions overpowered them and crushed all their bones.

²⁵ Then King Darius wrote to all the nations and peoples of every language in all the earth:

"May you prosper greatly!

²⁶ "I issue a decree that in every part of my kingdom people must fear and reverence the God of Daniel.

"For he is the living God
and he endures forever;

his kingdom will not be destroyed,
his dominion will never end.

²⁷ He rescues and he saves;
he performs signs and wonders
in the heavens and on the earth.

He has rescued Daniel
from the power of the lions."

²⁸ So Daniel prospered during the reign of Darius and the reign of Cyrus^[b]
the Persian.

Have you ever gone through a time when you got really inspired to begin working out in one way or another? You started your new adventure with great zeal and enthusiasm only to sputter and eventually stop. In retrospect, what went wrong? For most people, I think that they quit an exercise regimen because they are not experiencing the sorts of immediate results that they would like. To truly exercise in a safe and healthy way one must generally work slowly and gradually develop their ability and strength all the while making it a permanent part of their lifestyle. But when people don't get immediate results they often either try to do too much too fast to get better results and either burn out or injure themselves, or they just get discouraged and quit.

What is true in the world of exercise can also be equally true in our spiritual lives. We can begin to do things that will really energize and ramp up our relationship with God or with his people, or even get a renewed sense of our mission of evangelism or some other area. We attack things with great zeal and fervor but often quickly fade out. The reasons for such lack of perseverance are often the same as we mentioned above. People don't have the immediate success that they were hoping for and they give up.

- Read Hebrews 12:1
- Why is perseverance such a central element of the Christian life?
- How are you when it comes to persevering during difficult times or in times when you are not having great or immediate success?
- Are there any areas in your spiritual life where you have given up on right now because you weren't having the sort of success that you might have hoped for?

There were several times in Daniel's life, and this was certainly one of them, where he followed God blamelessly and it didn't seem to have much success. I wonder sometimes if that was difficult for him. The first time we are told that Daniel stepped out on great faith, the incident where he refused to eat from the King's table, God showed him immediate success. Yet, after that it took years for him to make a final influence in Nebuchadnezzar's life. Then he seemed to be equally righteous before Belshazzar but had virtually no success in truly influencing him.

Now had come the time for Daniel to remain faithful during the reign of Darius and that seemed to be going rather poorly as well. What had he gotten for his trouble? It got him a night with a group of hungry lions. We aren't told that he ever doubted but I have to wonder if at some point Daniel didn't start to feel like a failure and consider giving up the whole being faithful to God thing in the face of great opposition. Yet, he never wavered. He remained faithful whether it was popular or not and whether it seemed successful or not.

- Read Ezekiel 2:3-8
- Read 2 Timothy 4:2-5
- What do these two passages have in common?
- What is the basic vocation of the people of God in both examples?
- What is not to be the conditions on which someone decides to continue in their obedience to God?
- What are we to base our actions and perseverance on?
- How do you respond when you don't have immediate success in areas like evangelism or overcoming sin?
- Do you keep going or do you begin to base your emotions on your success?
- What are the dangers of basing our emotions on our level of success?

Daniel did stay faithful to God and that was all the difference in the world when it came to making an impact on Darius. Daniel stayed faithful when doing so was out of season and unpopular and it was only then that he found a time when his actions were in season.

In Mark 6, the disciples went through an incredibly long day. After a tiring evangelistic mission, Jesus and the disciples went to get some rest (6:32). That's when they were hit by the crowd of over 5,000. Then at the end of the day Jesus commanded them to row across the lake, which would have been a difficult task on a windy day. After 6 hours of rowing they still were not across the lake. By 3:00 AM they were only about half way and they must have been exhausted. At 3 AM, Jesus showed up with one of the most incredible miracles they had ever seen. What would have happened, though, if they had given up at 2:55 AM? How often have we quit at 2:55 AM during tough circumstances because we weren't experiencing success? How many miracles have we missed?

Time to Ponder

- Read and meditate on Mark 6:47-51
- Write out one way that this passage challenges you as read it today.
- Write down one conviction that you can either make or renew in your life based on this study.

Vantage Points - Day 31

Daniel 7:1-8

¹ In the first year of Belshazzar king of Babylon, Daniel had a dream, and visions passed through his mind as he was lying in bed. He wrote down the substance of his dream.

² Daniel said: "In my vision at night I looked, and there before me were the four winds of heaven churning up the great sea. ³ Four great beasts, each different from the others, came up out of the sea.

⁴ "The first was like a lion, and it had the wings of an eagle. I watched until its wings were torn off and it was lifted from the ground so that it stood on two feet like a human being, and the mind of a human was given to it.

⁵ "And there before me was a second beast, which looked like a bear. It was raised up on one of its sides, and it had three ribs in its mouth between its teeth. It was told, 'Get up and eat your fill of flesh!'

⁶ "After that, I looked, and there before me was another beast, one that looked like a leopard. And on its back it had four wings like those of a bird. This beast had four heads, and it was given authority to rule.

⁷ "After that, in my vision at night I looked, and there before me was a fourth beast—terrifying and frightening and very powerful. It had large iron teeth; it crushed and devoured its victims and trampled underfoot whatever was left. It was different from all the former beasts, and it had ten horns.

⁸ "While I was thinking about the horns, there before me was another horn, a little one, which came up among them; and three of the first horns were uprooted before it. This horn had eyes like the eyes of a human being and a mouth that spoke boastfully.

It has always amazed me how people that are right next to one another and very similar in almost every way can view events from a very different viewpoint. I was reminded of that the other day when watching a football game with my sons. One of my sons and I were cheering for one team while the other son was cheering for the other team. About half way through the game there was a controversial play in which my team was called for an interference penalty. My son that was cheering for my team and I were absolutely convinced that this call was a clear travesty of justice and our convictions only strengthened as they showed repeated replays. My other son was equally convinced that this was one of the greatest calls of all time. Even though they showed many replays of the play that wasn't enough for us so we began to rewind the play over and over and play it slowly and even stop it at certain points to get a better look. With each replay we would argue and wonder how the other one could not see the clear truth that we saw from our perspective concerning the play.

In Daniel 7 we have a bit of a switch from the first six chapters which are written chronologically and are mostly narratives. For the remainder of the book we will mostly get a smattering of visions that Daniel received from God throughout his entire life. This vision here goes back to the beginning of Belshazzar's reign. The dream is pretty much a parallel to the vision of the great statue with a head of gold that Nebuchadnezzar had during his reign.

Each beastly animal corresponds to a part of the statue in Nebuchadnezzar's dream and both visions had to do with the coming future of the great kingdoms of this area of the world. The first was Babylon which would soon give way to the kingdom of the Medes and Persians. That kingdom would then succumb to the Greeks which would in turn be swallowed up by the mighty Roman Empire. This was the terrifying fourth beast with teeth of iron that trampled everything else underfoot.

So what is the difference between this vision and the statue vision of Nebuchadnezzar? I think the primary difference is that Nebuchadnezzar's vision was given from the viewpoint of man while this vision is given from the perspective of God.

From man's point of view, the kingdoms of the world are a stately and towering statue made of impressive metals. They are, in other words, quite impressive. But from God's point of view, the kingdoms of the world are necessary but they are more like ravenous and wild beasts that devour and destroy most everything within their grasp. There is an ideal for a properly functioning state as described in Romans 13 but the reality is that from God's perspective the kingdoms of the world are not impressive. They reject God and his will and turn into devouring beasts. And as much as they'd like to think that are towers of control and power, they are nothing more than beasts that serve in subjection to God. That's a rather different viewpoint isn't it?

- Read 1 John 2:15-17
- Why is being impressed with the things of the world so dangerous?
- In what ways are you most tempted to be impressed by the things of the world or to love the things of the world?
- React to the statement that everything in your life is either a tool or an idol.
- What perspective does this passage give about the things of the world that help us to keep focused on and committed to the things of God instead?

The world becomes a radically different place when we view things from God's point of view rather than a worldly point of view. One of the main goals that we have as Christians is to truly see others and the whole world as God sees things.

- Read 2 Corinthians 5:15-17
- What does Paul mean here, in light of verse 15, by viewing others, including Christ, from a worldly point of view?
- What are some ways that you can view others from a worldly point of view?
- How does the Cross change our perspective on the way we view others?
- What are the dangers of basing our emotions on our level of success?

Time to Ponder

- Read and meditate on Isaiah 55:8-9
- Write out one way that this passage challenges you as read it today.
- Write down one conviction that you can either make or renew in your life based on this study.

The Ancient of Days - Day 32

Daniel 7:9-12

⁹ "As I looked,

"thrones were set in place,
and the Ancient of Days took his seat.

His clothing was as white as snow;
the hair of his head was white like wool.

His throne was flaming with fire,
and its wheels were all ablaze.

¹⁰ A river of fire was flowing,
coming out from before him.

Thousands upon thousands attended him;
ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him.

The court was seated,
and the books were opened.

¹¹ "Then I continued to watch because of the boastful words the horn was speaking. I kept looking until the beast was slain and its body destroyed and thrown into the blazing fire. ¹² (The other beasts had been stripped of their authority, but were allowed to live for a period of time.)

I spent many years as a basketball coach and during that time I learned that most players play the game for the approval of one of two entities. Smart players play the game for the approval of their coach, knowing that he is the ultimate judge of them. Others, however, tend to play for the approval of the fans. They do what they do based on how the fans react and often care much less about what the coach thinks. These types of players tend to grow very arrogant and will eventually come into conflict with the coach. The big problem for them, of course, is that the coach is the final judge of whether or not they have stacked up as an addition to the team and whether or not they will continue to play.

It is so easy for us to lose sight of who we really are to face as the ultimate judge of our lives that we tend to place other people or even ourselves in that role.

- Read Ecclesiastes 12:13-14
- What are some of the ways that we can forget that God is the one that we must stand before and be judged by?
- How can we lose sight of that on a day-in-day-out basis?

Daniel had just viewed the great beastly empires of the world that were and were to come but now he saw something else in his vision. The great empires might have thought that they were devouring and ruling the world but they would be sadly mistaken. All of the great empires of the world were in submission to the Ancient of Days. He was the one to whom every ruler, every kingdom, and every person must answer.

The horn was connected to the Roman Empire. He would continue to speak boastfully and fail to recognize God as the sovereign ruler of the universe. Rome and her leaders would think of themselves as sovereign and the greatest power in the history of the world. But they were nothing more than another in a line of beasts that had failed to recognize God as almighty and been brought low because of it. When the beasts denied God's authority they would eventually be stripped of their power and authority. This is what would happen to the final, ferocious beast and it is what will happen to everyone and everything that sets itself up against God.

- Read Revelation 1:12-18
- What are the parallels between Daniel 7 and Revelation 1 in their descriptions of the Ancient of Days and Jesus Christ?
- What does this tell us about Jesus?
- Read Romans 2:16; Acts 10:42
- What do these passages remind us about Jesus?
- How does that impact the way we go about living our daily lives?

It's not just emperors or an empire that gets full of themselves and set themselves up against God is it? We can easily be just as guilty of that same folly as any emperor. We can easily begin to think that the opinions and perceptions of those around us matter more than God's. We can easily begin to think that what we want or what they want is more important than what God wants. Passages like this one, though, remind us that we all stand before the Ancient of Days as our ultimate judge. Take some time to read back through that description of the Ancient of Days until you get a clear picture of him in your mind.

Time to Ponder

- Read and meditate on 1 Peter 1:17
- Write out one way that this passage challenges you as read it today.
- Write down one conviction that you can either make or renew in your life based on this study.

Like a Son of Man - Day 33

Daniel 7:13-14

¹³ "In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man,^[a] coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. ¹⁴ He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all nations and peoples of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.

For well over a decade my favorite American football team, the Green Bay Packers, had what was well known to be one of the greatest quarterbacks of all time. He had become a legend and had led the team to a Super Bowl win. But as he got older, the team decided to draft a new, young quarterback to eventually replace him. Then the time came when they felt that it was best for the team for the young guy to start and for the legend to either retire or move on. He moved on but most fans were either furious or extremely nervous. How could this new quarterback come even close to the ability of the old one? It is now three years after that young quarterback got his first start and he has shown himself in that short period of time to be just as good, if not better, than the legend and has already equaled the legend's career total of taking his team to one Super Bowl win. I couldn't help but think, though, that if everyone had just known back then how good this new player was going to be, it would have saved a lot of trouble.

Human beings are pretty amazing in our ability to get used to things, even if they're bad things. We can get used to them and then prefer that known quantity, however bad it may be, to the unknown. God knows that because he designed and made human beings, and so when things are bound to change, God will usually give us reassurances about what is going to happen so that we can know and not be afraid.

In Daniel's time the world had only known powerful earthly kingdoms. One would rise, it would fall, and another would take its place. But this vision holds out another promise. One day, one like the son of man would rise. He would bring a different sort of kingdom that would transcend and overshadow all other kingdoms. This kingdom would be everlasting and would never be destroyed. God gave this vision to Daniel, at least in part, as a comfort to those who might be apprehensive about such a different sort of kingdom. How could one put their trust and loyalty into a kingdom from God when the kingdoms of men seemed so powerful and dangerous? It was because this kingdom had all authority, glory, and sovereign power. In other words God was saying, "Relax. Trust this kingdom. It will be worth it?"

- Read Matthew 6:19-34
- How do the underlying principles of that passage rest on a passage like this?
- Why is it important to know and truly embrace that the son of man has all authority and sovereign power?

In Daniel's vision, he saw one who was like a son of man. He was human and yet, somehow, was more than that for he was "like" a son of man. He was, as the life of Jesus

would later make clear, the God-man. This one like a son of man is clearly pictured as distinct from the Ancient of Days but the previous description of the Ancient of Days is almost identical to the description of Jesus given in Revelation 1 which leaves us with an important question. How can the Messiah be both distinct from the Ancient of Days and yet appear to be virtually indistinguishable from him? The answer to that lies in understanding the true nature of God.

The world of Daniel's day had seen plenty of great rulers take their turns at being sovereign over all and try to establish their earthly kingdoms forever. But what they were completely incapable of doing, the one like a son of man would do. He would have true power and authority and would establish a kingdom that consisted of people of all nations that would never be destroyed.

The basic heart of the matter of Daniel's vision then comes down to trust. One does not have to put their trust in the kingdoms of the world or hang on to them blindly because it is all we have ever known. We can instead grab hold to God's kingdom for it is eternal and powerful and can never be shaken or destroyed.

- Read Hebrews 12:18-27
- As you read carefully through this passage and Daniel 7:13-14, record all of the differences that you see between God's kingdom and the kingdoms of the world.
- How does this inform your understanding of God's kingdom and how does it lead us to respond to his kingdom?
- How should it change our trust in and loyalty to the kingdoms or things of the world?

Time to Ponder

- Read and meditate on Hebrews 12:28-29
- Write out one way that this passage challenges you as read it today.
- Write down one conviction that you can either make or renew in your life based on this study.

Knowing What is Ahead - Day 34

Daniel 7:15-25

¹⁵ “I, Daniel, was troubled in spirit, and the visions that passed through my mind disturbed me. ¹⁶ I approached one of those standing there and asked him the meaning of all this.

“So he told me and gave me the interpretation of these things: ¹⁷ ‘The four great beasts are four kings that will rise from the earth. ¹⁸ But the holy people of the Most High will receive the kingdom and will possess it forever—yes, for ever and ever.’

¹⁹ “Then I wanted to know the meaning of the fourth beast, which was different from all the others and most terrifying, with its iron teeth and bronze claws—the beast that crushed and devoured its victims and trampled underfoot whatever was left. ²⁰ I also wanted to know about the ten horns on its head and about the other horn that came up, before which three of them fell—the horn that looked more imposing than the others and that had eyes and a mouth that spoke boastfully. ²¹ As I watched, this horn was waging war against the holy people and defeating them, ²² until the Ancient of Days came and pronounced judgment in favor of the holy people of the Most High, and the time came when they possessed the kingdom.

²³ “He gave me this explanation: ‘The fourth beast is a fourth kingdom that will appear on earth. It will be different from all the other kingdoms and will devour the whole earth, trampling it down and crushing it. ²⁴ The ten horns are ten kings who will come from this kingdom. After them another king will arise, different from the earlier ones; he will subdue three kings. ²⁵ He will speak against the Most High and oppress his holy people and try to change the set times and the laws. The holy people will be delivered into his hands for a time, times and half a time.’^[b]

There is nothing worse than the unexpected. If I am going to face a difficult time, I just do much better if I know that it is coming and I can prepare myself mentally for the situation. Years ago, when I was getting ready to run in my first marathon, I was getting rather nervous about what the race would entail and whether or not I would be up to the task. Then I had some people tell me some horror stories about how badly things could go and had actually gone for people during a marathon. You might think that this scared me or made me feel worse, but in a weird sort of way it made me feel better. I knew what I was up against and I could prepare myself for it. In fact, knowing the worst case scenarios took the mystery out of it and made me feel much more at peace.

It is amazing just how much the unexpected or the unknown can make us worry and cause us anxiety. But knowing that we are in for a hard time can be rather calming. We know what we're up against and we can prepare for it.

- How do you respond to the unknown or the unexpected?
- In what ways are you most prone to struggle with fear or anxiety?
- How much does the thought of being rejected by others around you make you feel?
- Does the idea of being a societal outcast or misfit cause you fear and anxiety?
- Read 2 Timothy 3:10-13
- Why would Paul write such a thing?
- How does it make you feel to read those words?

Daniel's vision is clearly about the coming of the Messiah and his people in the context of the four great promised kingdoms. But this vision has some terrifying truths that are in

store for the people of the most high when they possess this promised kingdom. The great and ferocious beast will make war against them. He will even be well on his way towards defeating them and seemingly wiping them out.

In other words, the Messiah would have a people that could finally be part of God's eternal kingdom but they would pay a dear price. To follow the one like a son of man meant to be persecuted. It might mean death. Imagine how that might make you feel if you were a new Christian reading those words in the first century. It wouldn't take much work to figure out that you were one of the people of the Most High and that you lived during the time of the fourth beast. You would know what was coming. Would that comfort you in knowing that you were doing the right thing or would it fill you with even more fear?

One of the constant messages of the New Testament is confirmation of this aspect of Daniel's prophecy. The people of the Messiah, if they are living faithfully, will be persecuted. During the time of the fourth beast that could mean violent persecution and death. During our own time it might be seemingly minor, but still powerful motivators like being unpopular in the public opinion or being called too radical or unloving, or almost anything that will tone down our convictions and behavior. We will face opposition. Are you prepared for that?

- Read John 15:18-21
- Do you embrace the idea of opposition from the world or do you shy away from it?
- What types of opposition or persecution, if any, have you faced concerning your Christian life?
- How does knowing that we will face opposition make you feel?

Time to Ponder

- Read and meditate on 1 Corinthians 4:12-13
- Write out one way that this passage challenges you as read it today.
- Write down one conviction that you can either make or renew in your life based on this study.

I Have Overcome - Day 35

Daniel 7:26-28

²⁶ “But the court will sit, and his power will be taken away and completely destroyed forever. ²⁷ Then the sovereignty, power and greatness of all the kingdoms under heaven will be handed over to the holy people of the Most High. His kingdom will be an everlasting kingdom, and all rulers will worship and obey him.”

²⁸ “This is the end of the matter. I, Daniel, was deeply troubled by my thoughts, and my face turned pale, but I kept the matter to myself.”

“If I can do it, you can do it.” That’s a popular phrase in our culture that’s usually intended to encourage someone with their ability to get through a difficult situation or circumstance based on the previously demonstrated ability of the speaker to overcome the same situation. Sometimes that phrase can be encouraging and motivational but sometimes it can fall it a bit short. The fact that “you” can do it would be a really wonderful detail if “you” were trying to do something now but the fact is “I” am trying to do it, so the fact that you did it doesn’t always mean much.

Although the expression does have some merit and can encourage us sometimes and show us that something is possible that we might have previously thought to be impossible, the problem is that someone else cannot really pass on their ability to overcome something to us. If they could do that, now that would truly be encouraging. That would be something to hang on to.

- How do you respond to spiritual situations in your life that seem extremely difficult or that you don’t think you can overcome?
- Are there any situations right now that you think are too hard to change or overcome?
- What have you done previously in those areas?

Daniel’s vision of the future was disconcerting to him because he saw hard times ahead for the people of God. In God’s vision, the one like the son of man would be surrounded by the great beast. His people were facing extremely difficult days and they would be fiercely persecuted.

Looking ahead to the ferocity of the final beast would make one wonder what sort of chance the people of the Most High might have. The great beast would have great power and seemingly rule over the world.

But this is where one of the great themes of the book of Daniel comes into play. At the very beginning we are told that Babylon had taken the articles from the Temple as a sign of the King of Babylon’s great sovereignty over the world. But the question of Daniel is about who really is sovereign over the world. Was it an earthly king or the Most High God? Would this ferocious beast, the Roman Empire, prove itself to be sovereign over the one like a son of man?

Daniel's vision gives a clear answer to that. The answer is "no." All of the power and greatness of the greatest kingdom that mankind could imagine would be humbled by the Most High and the one like a son of man. But then comes the amazing part. It would be one thing to say that the greatness of God's kingdom would bring the kingdoms of the world low but in Daniel's vision, he could see that the kingdom of God would be handed over to the people of the Most High. He would overcome the world and give them the power to share in his authority.

- Read John 16:33; 1 John 4:4
- How does knowing that the Messiah has truly overcome the systems and power of the world change the way we think about our own ability to overcome issues?
- What do these verses mean to you personally as you look at your own struggles?

The vision of Daniel reminds us, as the people who have entered into the life of the one like a son of man and become the people of the Most High, of two important truths. The first is that we will face tough times and even persecution. We may not face the specific ferocity of the great fourth beast, but part of being a Christian is to live differently from the world which will always cause opposition of some kind. The second important truth, however, is that although this opposition may be extremely unpleasant and we may think that we face sin, evil, opponents or situations that we cannot overcome, we must always remember that God is sovereign. Jesus has already overcome the world and given us the ability to share in his victory. This truly is a case where because he did it, we can do it too.

Time to Ponder

- Read and meditate on 1 John 5:4-5
- Write out one way that this passage challenges you as read it today.
- Write down one conviction that you can either make or renew in your life based on this study.

As You Please - Day 36

Daniel 8:1-8

¹ In the third year of King Belshazzar's reign, I, Daniel, had a vision, after the one that had already appeared to me. ² In my vision I saw myself in the citadel of Susa in the province of Elam; in the vision I was beside the Ulai Canal. ³ I looked up, and there before me was a ram with two horns, standing beside the canal, and the horns were long. One of the horns was longer than the other but grew up later. ⁴ I watched the ram as it charged toward the west and the north and the south. No animal could stand against it, and none could rescue from its power. It did as it pleased and became great.

⁵ As I was thinking about this, suddenly a goat with a prominent horn between its eyes came from the west, crossing the whole earth without touching the ground. ⁶ It came toward the two-horned ram I had seen standing beside the canal and charged at it in great rage. ⁷ I saw it attack the ram furiously, striking the ram and shattering its two horns. The ram was powerless to stand against it; the goat knocked it to the ground and trampled on it, and none could rescue the ram from its power. ⁸ The goat became very great, but at the height of its power the large horn was broken off, and in its place four prominent horns grew up toward the four winds of heaven.

Have you ever been around someone that seemed like they believed that they answered to no one? If you've ever had to work for such a person then I truly feel badly for you. It is not easy to be around someone who just does as they please and seems to have no opposition, no one to stop them, and no one to answer to. It's simply unpleasant to be around someone who either has that much power or thinks that they have such power.

Yet, as distasteful as that can be, some of the same people, who are completely disgusted by other human beings doing exactly what they please and living as though they don't have to answer to anyone, live their own lives as if they don't have to answer to anyone themselves. They live for themselves. They put their own interests first constantly and they do what is best for them as though they can do exactly what they please and will not have to answer to God.

- What are some of the ways that people in our world tend to live for themselves and do as they please?
- What are some of the ways that you can be tempted to put your own interests first and to live as you please?

The first six of Daniel's 12 chapters are mostly chronological narrative but that switches dramatically in the last half of the book. Another major change happens in chapter 8. The first chapter and first few verses of chapter 2 are written in Hebrew. The book then switches to Aramaic through chapter 7 but switches back to Hebrew in chapter 8. There may be several reasons for this but one of them certainly is that Daniel felt that these final chapters had specific interest for the people of Israel at the time.

This vision is a more detailed vision of the second and third kingdoms of Daniel's previous two visions concerning the coming kingdoms of the world at the time. The ram represents the kingdom of the Persians and Medes, with the longer and more powerful Persian horn compared to that of the Medes. This arrogant kingdom seemed to answer

to no one and do whatever it pleased. It lorded its power over that area of the world and seemed to be unstoppable.

That is never the case, though, no matter how much it might seem that way. A mighty goat rose up to charge the ram and shattered it. The goat represented the kingdom of the Greeks under Alexander the Great, who was himself the one mighty horn of the goat. The ram fell victim to its own worldview where power means everything. In a world where one looks out for their own interests, power and might mean everything. The most powerful will dominate everyone and everything else.

Just when the great-horned goat was at the height of its own power and glory and living for itself, it was unexpectedly broken off. This would find fulfillment in Alexander's early and unexpected death. His empire was quickly divided into four lesser but still prominent horns under Ptolemy, Seleucus, Lysimachus, and Cassander.

- Read Matthew 20:25-28
- What is the characteristic of normal power that Jesus identifies here?
- How have you seen this displayed during your own lifetime?
- What is the underlying belief that leads to people lording their own power over others and generally looking out for their own self-interests?
- How does this type of worldview seem to be an advantage to people? Why is it appealing?

Daniel's visions of the various beasts are a snapshot of the succession of powerful men and kingdoms that would each take their place in the ever-rolling wheel of power, might, and domination. But each time, Daniel leads to the vision of a different kind of kingdom, that of the Messiah. He would call people to live a different way. That is why 2 Corinthians 5:14-15 says that Jesus died so that we no longer had to live for ourselves. There might be some appeal on a personal level to that way of life, but living for ourselves and our own interests doesn't work. It tears down societies eventually and causes nearly all of the violence, evil, and sin that we find in our world. This is why the call for the people of the Messiah is to be those that lay down their lives for others and live with the interests of others as our primary call.

- Read Philippians 2:3-4
- How does this way of life contrast from the normal routine of trying to live as we please and looking out for our own interests?
- In what specific areas of your life does this challenge you to be more committed to the way that Jesus called his people to live?

Time to Ponder

- Read and meditate on 1 John 3:16
- Write out one way that this passage challenges you as read it today.
- Write down one conviction that you can either make or renew in your life based on this study.

In God We Trust? - Day 37

Daniel 8:9-14

⁹ Out of one of them came another horn, which started small but grew in power to the south and to the east and toward the Beautiful Land. ¹⁰ It grew until it reached the host of the heavens, and it threw some of the starry host down to the earth and trampled on them. ¹¹ It set itself up to be as great as the commander of the army of the LORD; it took away the daily sacrifice from the LORD, and his sanctuary was thrown down. ¹² Because of rebellion, the LORD's people^[a] and the daily sacrifice were given over to it. It prospered in everything it did, and truth was thrown to the ground.

¹³ Then I heard a holy one speaking, and another holy one said to him, "How long will it take for the vision to be fulfilled—the vision concerning the daily sacrifice, the rebellion that causes desolation, the surrender of the sanctuary and the trampling underfoot of the LORD's people?"

¹⁴ He said to me, "It will take 2,300 evenings and mornings; then the sanctuary will be reconsecrated."

As I write this, May 21st, 2011 is still many months in the future. By the time you read this, it will probably be in the past. That is an interesting day to me this year for two reasons. One is that I am scheduled to marry a wonderful young couple on that day, Lord willing, and help them begin a life together of glorifying God. The second reason is that a religious group in the United States has made somewhat of a splash in the news this year by declaring that their tireless study of the Scriptures, including the book of Daniel, has revealed to them that the world will be judged by the Holy God and come to an end on May 21st, 2011. In fact, a friend of mine gave me a pamphlet from this group a few weeks ago and I hold it my hand right now.

Of course, if you are reading this after that date and the world didn't end, which I presume it didn't or you probably wouldn't be reading this, then that group was wrong. Making predictive prophecies is a tricky thing, yet so many different people and groups in our world try to do it. The common theme amongst all groups and individuals that make prophecies, however, is that they are all wrong some of, if not most of the time.

Anyone can make predictions about the future, even very shrewd ones. But only the Bible has a perfect record. An important point when it comes to predictive prophecy in the Bible is that it teaches us that the God of the Bible is the true God.

Time and again throughout the book of Daniel we see the pretenders unable to interpret the future or to predict. Yet, every time they fail, Daniel succeeds through the power of God. As clear as this message should be, it is amazing how often we as humans fall for the counterfeits rather than the truth of God's word. It may not be false prophecies that we fall for like the above mentioned pamphlet but we certainly fall for false philosophies and false ways of living and acting all of the time, even as Christians. The prophecies in God's word show him to be the only true God, one that can and should be trusted in every area of our lives.

- Read Psalm 91:1-2
- Do you truly put your trust in God's ways alone and not the ways of the world?
- How do you personally determine that you are trusting in God and not something worldly?
- What are some of the things of the world that tempt you to put your trust in them?

As Daniel continues to describe his prophecy of the future as it pertains specifically to Israel, he tells of a coming terrible time where God's people will suffer greatly as a result of their own rebellion against God. A mighty warrior will rise up and conquer Israel, subjecting it to his will rather than God's. Israel had been and would continue to be enamored with the concept of doing their own will rather than God's and this prophecy makes clear that God would soon show them exactly what it felt like to live in a world where the wills of individual humans seemed to trump God's will. They would feel what it was like to live in a world of human will and would bow to the will of one who would set himself up as God.

That's the real problem with sin. It seems good at first, especially when it benefits us but in reality it is always a snare and a trap. Doing our own will rather than God's can seem good for a time, but it really is slavery waiting to entice us. Once we give ourselves over to following human will rather than God, we will quickly be entrapped and crushed in a world where someone else, far more powerful, is exerting their own will.

That's why it is important to note the times, like those of predictive prophecy in Daniel, that demonstrate for us that God is the true God. He is the only one worth listening to. His way is the only way that really leads to truth.

- Read 1 Peter 1:19-21
- What does this passage tell us about the importance of understanding that predictive prophecies come from God and not humans?
- If prophecies are to help us trust in God and know that he is the true sovereign God then how should prophecies like those in Daniel effect how we live each day, even if those prophecies don't directly affect our lives?

Time to Ponder

- Read and meditate on Psalm 40:4-5
- Write out one way that this passage challenges you as read it today.
- Write down one conviction that you can either make or renew in your life based on this study.

His Presence - Day 38

Daniel 8:15-17

¹⁵ While I, Daniel, was watching the vision and trying to understand it, there before me stood one who looked like a man. ¹⁶ And I heard a man's voice from the Ulai calling, "Gabriel, tell this man the meaning of the vision."

¹⁷ As he came near the place where I was standing, I was terrified and fell prostrate. "Son of man,"^[b] he said to me, "understand that the vision concerns the time of the end."

Many years ago, when I was a teenager, I had a particular rap artist that I really looked up to. He was well known for his positive lyrics and lack of profanity, as well as having lyrics that were just full of intelligence and ingenuity. I never thought that I would get to meet him but one day a friend of mine got us some tickets to drive about an hour away and see him in concert. I was so excited with all of the things that I would say to him and ask him about if only I could actually meet him but I knew that that was more of a dream than reality. As we got to the concert, though, I realized that my sister and her friend were also going and I nearly flipped when I found out that my sister's friend knew one of the men in this rapper's group and was able to get us backstage after the show.

There was a flurry of activity after the show and suddenly I found myself standing before this very man. But I was overwhelmed. Rather than asking all of the questions that I had planned to ask if I ever got this opportunity and telling him all of the things that I wanted to, I just froze. I stood there and listened to him talk to others and I never said a word after the initial shaking of hands and saying "hi". I thought that I could handle being in his presence but at that time I couldn't.

I think of that incident often because I so often hear of people wanting to see God for themselves or have him appear to them or something along those lines. People often speak of that as though they would be able to comport themselves just fine and stand in the presence of God and get out all of the questions that they have and say all of the things that they want tell God. That is just not the reality of the situation, though. Entering into God's presence is no small thing. In fact every time someone in the Bible found themselves confronted with even a portion of God's presence or a messenger from heaven (not even God himself) they fell apart. They quickly realized that being in the presence of the God of heaven is far more than they could handle.

- Read Isaiah 6:1-5
- Why do you think Isaiah responded in such a way when he found himself in the heavenly presence?
- Do you think that you take God's presence too lightly at times?
- Why is it important to consider the gravity of being in the presence of the Most High God?
- How does having a proper understanding of God's presence help us as we go through the routine of our daily lives?

Daniel continues to describe the vision that he received from heaven. When faced merely with the prospect of hearing a voice from heaven and seeing the messenger of the Lord, Daniel fell down terrified. This seems to be the normative response that human beings have when confronted with the presence of heaven. They were terrified and suddenly filled with a dreaded sense of their own shortcomings and lack of holiness. Imagine what they would have felt if they were fully in the presence of the God who is a consuming fire.

Often times the best way to tell a counterfeit is to put it right next to the genuine article. The differences usually become glaringly obvious. When we come into the presence of God, our shortcomings and sinfulness become glaring next to his holiness. Entering into God's presence is no small thing.

Yet, because of the sacrifice of Jesus on the Cross we are told that we now can enter into God's presence. One of the main ways that we do that regularly and tangibly is through prayer. But I wonder if we take entering into the presence of God (although in another real respect we are always in his presence) as seriously as we should. I wonder if we don't sometimes take prayer way too lightly and not take time to recognize the holiness of the One into whose presence we stand when we pray.

Time to Ponder

- Read and meditate on Hebrews 10:19-23
- Write out one way that this passage challenges you as read it today.
- Write down one conviction that you can either make or renew in your life based on this study.

Why Them? - Day 39

Daniel 8:18-25

¹⁸ While he was speaking to me, I was in a deep sleep, with my face to the ground. Then he touched me and raised me to my feet.

¹⁹ He said: "I am going to tell you what will happen later in the time of wrath, because the vision concerns the appointed time of the end."^[E] ²⁰ The two-horned ram that you saw represents the kings of Media and Persia. ²¹ The shaggy goat is the king of Greece, and the large horn between its eyes is the first king. ²² The four horns that replaced the one that was broken off represent four kingdoms that will emerge from his nation but will not have the same power.

²³ "In the latter part of their reign, when rebels have become completely wicked, a fierce-looking king, a master of intrigue, will arise. ²⁴ He will become very strong, but not by his own power. He will cause astounding devastation and will succeed in whatever he does. He will destroy those who are mighty, the holy people. ²⁵ He will cause deceit to prosper, and he will consider himself superior. When they feel secure, he will destroy many and take his stand against the Prince of princes. Yet he will be destroyed, but not by human power.

Not all that many years ago, before going into the full-time ministry I was a high school basketball coach and was president of our athletic conference. During my time in both positions I worked very hard for us to have a good basketball team but we also made sure to follow all of the rules of the conference and do it in the right way. But there was another school that was well known in our conference for having a bad reputation. They were constantly getting in trouble and incurring small punishments but they were also massively successful and didn't seem to care too much about breaking the rules.

As president, it was up to me to catch rules infractions but this school was really good at it. They seemed to be using ineligible players and similar things but covered it up so well that we could never prove it. So they continued to win our conference year after year. It was really disheartening for the schools that were following the rules and doing things the right way to have to lose to them year after year.

Their constant success every year seemed to raise a question that most of us can relate to in one way or the other. Why do the wicked seem to prosper? It can be downright annoying can't it? Someone at work lies or cheats and they seem to get ahead. Or someone downloads all of those bootleg "apps" onto their new iphone and now it does all kinds of incredible things that your regular old phone doesn't do. It just doesn't seem fair sometimes.

- Read Jeremiah 12:1-4
- How can you relate to Jeremiah's feelings here?
- How do you feel when people of the world seem to get ahead and don't honor God with their lives? Do you ever feel bitter about that?
- What is your biblical response to those feelings and questions about why the wicked seem to prosper at times?

As Daniel receives the interpretation of the strange vision that he received, he gets some rather disturbing news. The kingdoms will come and go, as previous visions and dreams in the book of Daniel have already shown, but a master of intrigue will arise. There is little doubt that this was a prophecy of Antiochus Epiphanes, a ruler who would conquer Jerusalem, control it, and go to the horrifying lengths of sacrificing a pig to a pagan god in the Holy of Holies in the Temple.

In other words, a great and terrifying leader would rise up and bring ruin and destruction to the nation of Israel. He would destroy the holy people and great evil would prosper under him.

And that's where it can be difficult for us to understand. How can the wicked prosper? Why would God allow that? The answer comes in verse 25. The evil ones will prosper for a time and feel secure, but we must not forget the great theme of Daniel. God is sovereign. The prosperity of the wicked is illusory. It will not last. Evil will take a stand against the great Prince of princes and when it does, it will be destroyed in the long run of things. Human power is not sovereign and never will be. It is always God who is in control. The reality is that the wicked never prosper in God's reality, which is the only reality that truly matters.

That is what we must always remember. The wicked might seem to be getting ahead but that is only if we looking wrongly at what is valuable. Is it more valuable to succeed in the present age and in the eyes of men or to stand righteously before God? As God is our true judge and his eternal age is our true measure of success then we must realize that temporary gains by the wicked are actually debt rather than credit. That temporary gain drives us further from God so if we realize that standing righteously before God is our true success then we will be comforted to know that God will eventually judge the wicked and their supposed gains will be counted as loss.

- Read Psalm 37:1-17
- What is the Psalmist's answer to the feeling that the wicked prosper?
- What encouragement does he give to be righteous?
- What is the benefit of being righteous and putting our trust in God rather than success?
- In what ways can you be tempted to join into the seeming prosperity of the wicked?
- How does this Psalm help you to answer those temptations?

Time to Ponder

- Read and meditate on Psalm 37:18-19; 23-24
- Write out one way that this passage challenges or encourages you as read it today.
- Write down one conviction that you can either make or renew in your life based on this study.

I Don't Understand - Day 40

Daniel 8:26-27

²⁶ "The vision of the evenings and mornings that has been given you is true, but seal up the vision, for it concerns the distant future."

²⁷ I, Daniel, was worn out. I lay exhausted for several days. Then I got up and went about the king's business. I was appalled by the vision; it was beyond understanding.

Have you ever had a boss, teacher, or parent ask you to do something for them? What is your normal response when you're asked to do something for someone? Most of us do our best to carry out that request but there are times when that can be difficult. One of the most difficult times to really follow someone's instructions or carry out a request is when you just don't understand their purposes in what they have asked. I'm not talking about situations when you don't understand their words but situations when you do understand what they are saying but you just don't understand why they would do such a thing. Usually because you don't understand their purposes you disagree with them or they it at least causes you great angst.

One of my favorite scenes from the movie "Karate Kid" is when the teacher asks the student to continually perform mundane tasks like sanding a deck and waxing a car. The student doesn't understand the purpose of these tasks and eventually gets quite frustrated. He fails to see that his teacher is actually teaching him techniques through these tasks that he will need to use in karate. He rebels briefly until he finally understands what is going on.

We can be like that with God can't we? We're more than willing to click along and obey him until some things start happening that we don't understand. Why would God allow this? Why would God work like this? That's when it gets difficult.

- Read Psalm 13
- Are there any things about how God is working in your life right now that you don't understand and are struggling with?
- What about that situation makes you struggle?
- How do you work through those times when you don't understand what God is up to?
- What is the Psalmist's answer to his own questions about what God was doing?
- What would that look like in your own life?

After receiving a rather amazing vision that was surely surreal and was definitely disturbing for Daniel, he ends this chapter with a couple of verses that are stunning in their realism. There is no attempt to put varnish on anything here. Daniel is told that these things would take place in the future so they were something that simply needed to be written and recorded rather than preached in earnest to the people of his day. But then he tells us that he was appalled by the vision and that it exhausted him. It took him

several days before he could get up and get back to his job. He was absolutely horrified by the thought that God's people would be so devastated by this master of intrigue (someone that history has revealed to be Antiochus Ephiphanes in the century before Christ). Daniel simply could not understand all of this or why God would work this way. And the stark reality was that he would likely never fully understand it in his lifetime. Imagine knowing that God was sovereign and would work in such a horrifying way but not being able to ever understand why.

Daniel saw God's plan, did not understand it, but had to get up and continue the king's business. Knowing Daniel as we have come to through this book we know that that meant that he was not just going about the earthly king's business as a part of his job and position but he was going about God's business. He would continue to loyally serve the God that he did not understand.

- Read Psalm 31:14
- What does this verse call us to do even during times when we don't understand how God is working or what he is up to?
- What does it take from us to truly turn our trust over to God especially during times that go beyond our understanding?

Time to Ponder

- Read and meditate on Psalm 131
- Write out one way that this passage challenges you as read it today.
- Write down one conviction that you can either make or renew in your life based on this study.

When We're Troubled - Day 41

Daniel 9:1-3

¹ In the first year of Darius son of Xerxes^[a] (a Mede by descent), who was made ruler over the Babylonian^[b] kingdom— ² in the first year of his reign, I, Daniel, understood from the Scriptures, according to the word of the LORD given to Jeremiah the prophet, that the desolation of Jerusalem would last seventy years. ³ So I turned to the Lord God and pleaded with him in prayer and petition, in fasting, and in sackcloth and ashes.

The things that we turn to during our most difficult trials and situations say a lot about what we value. As a young non-Christian I would often want to be alone when facing difficult challenges. This was probably a pretty good indication of my own pride. I thought that I could handle things on my own. Others turn to food, alcohol, friends, or a number of other things. In fact, it could be said that the things we turn to for comfort in our most difficult times have been given the role of God in our lives.

Because of his visions, Daniel knew that things would continue to be tough for God's people and that difficult times were still ahead. Daniel was deeply disturbed by this situation so what was his response? What would you do in Daniel's shoes? Daniel responded by turning to the Scriptures and then turning to God in fervent prayer and fasting.

Daniel was a prophet that was often inspired directly by God, yet he knew the importance of reading Scripture for himself. When he humbly went to the Scriptures, God directed to the exact portion of Scripture that he needed for direction and understanding. He saw through the writing of Jeremiah that the desolation of God's people in the present situation were coming close to an end. The time of the present exile was drawing to a close

- Read Isaiah 55:10-11
- What do these passages tell us about God's word?
- What is your typical response when you face troubling questions or situations?
- Do you truly turn to God's word for direction?
- Do you devote yourself to the study of God's word consistently enough that you know how to turn to it for direction and guidance through difficult situations?

After receiving insight from the Scriptures, Daniel then turned to God in prayer. Scripture had assured Daniel that the time of the exile was coming to a close (perhaps as quickly as to happen within about three years). He prayed for the very thing that Scripture had made clear would happen. Daniel knew that God doesn't simply decree things and that we are helpless pawns in his mighty plans. Daniel knew that God does work according to his own will, his own plans, and his own timetable but also that God works through the

actions, attitudes, and prayers of human beings. God has plans but it is often up to us whether or not we are part of those plans.

Daniel understood the important truth that knowledge of God's promises should stir us to action and fervent prayer rather than just sitting back and being resigned to the idea that God will do what God will do and we play no part. Faith is not shown in sitting back and letting God do as he wills. Our faith is shown when we pray for what God has promised to come to pass. It is shown when we cling to his promises and seek to be part of them. After all, the prayers of the righteous are powerful and effective.

- Read James 5:16
- Do you really believe that prayer is powerful and effective?
- Do you pray regularly for God's will to be done and to be an important conduit through which God's will can flow?
- When we fail to pray consistently or faithfully it is really a demonstration of the fact that we don't really have faith in God's power or willingness to answer prayer.

We are also told that Daniel did more than just turn to the Scriptures and pray. He also fasted. Fasting has always been an important aspect of appealing to God. It is recognition that we are spiritually poor and hungry before God and that we need him to work powerfully. It is a constant demonstration of our reliance on the sustaining power of God. The people of Daniel's day as well as the early Christians believed that the humility shown in fasting actually caused the prayers to be more effective. Since God lifts up the humble, the humility that is shown in our fasting moves God even more powerfully to use us as part of his plans.

- Read Mark 9:29
- What does this passage tell us about the power of fasting in addition to normal prayer?
- Have you ever really studied out the idea of fasting and what it means Scripturally?
- Read Isaiah 58
- What does this passage inform us about fasting?
- Do you fast regularly as an appeal to God?

Time to Ponder

- Read and meditate on 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18
- Write out one way that this passage challenges you as read it today.
- Write down one conviction that you can either make or renew in your life based on this study.

We Not Me - Day 42

Daniel 9:4-14

⁴ I prayed to the LORD my God and confessed:

“Lord, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and keep his commandments, ⁵ we have sinned and done wrong. We have been wicked and have rebelled; we have turned away from your commands and laws. ⁶ We have not listened to your servants the prophets, who spoke in your name to our kings, our princes and our ancestors, and to all the people of the land.

⁷ “Lord, you are righteous, but this day we are covered with shame—the people of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem and all Israel, both near and far, in all the countries where you have scattered us because of our unfaithfulness to you. ⁸ We and our kings, our princes and our ancestors are covered with shame, LORD, because we have sinned against you. ⁹ The Lord our God is merciful and forgiving, even though we have rebelled against him; ¹⁰ we have not obeyed the LORD our God or kept the laws he gave us through his servants the prophets. ¹¹ All Israel has transgressed your law and turned away, refusing to obey you.

“Therefore the curses and sworn judgments written in the Law of Moses, the servant of God, have been poured out on us, because we have sinned against you. ¹² You have fulfilled the words spoken against us and against our rulers by bringing on us great disaster. Under the whole heaven nothing has ever been done like what has been done to Jerusalem. ¹³ Just as it is written in the Law of Moses, all this disaster has come on us, yet we have not sought the favor of the LORD our God by turning from our sins and giving attention to your truth. ¹⁴ The LORD did not hesitate to bring the disaster on us, for the LORD our God is righteous in everything he does; yet we have not obeyed him.

Modern Western thinkers have a unique perspective when compared to the history of the world. We have placed ourselves as individuals at the center of the universe and see everything in terms of individualistic perspective. The benefit of the group means little to nothing in comparison to the needs or desires of the individual. And we certainly wouldn't think of taking any individual blame for something that a group did even if we are part of that group.

This type of thinking has certainly seeped into the church. We have reduced salvation, worship, and the Christian life as a whole down to an individual endeavor. But it was never meant to be that. God has always cared about the individual but he has always worked with a group of people rather than individuals. The people of biblical times understood that they had individual responsibility before God but even more important was the fact that their identity came from their people group. Either you were part of Israel or not during what we call the Old Testament times. Now it comes down to whether you are part of God's family in Christ or not. We share honor and identity with the people of God.

- Read Philippians 2:12-13
- At first glance, what does this passage mean to you?
- Most people read it as an individual exhortation as though we must, as individuals, work out our own salvation. But this is not how Paul would have intended it, nor how it would have been understood in the early church.
- Paul was challenging the entire church to work out together and share in their common life as the people of God. He was challenging them to live out the values of Philippians 2:3-4 in their corporate life together. He was writing to a church not a group of individuals.
- How can it challenge and change our thinking to realize that challenges like this are written to the entire church rather than individuals?

Daniel certainly understood that idea and it led to a shocking response on his part; at least shocking to 21st century readers. Daniel knew that Israel had sinned and was being punished and would continue to be punished for their rebellion. But if anyone had just cause to separate themselves as an individual from the sin of a people it was Daniel. There is nothing in the book of Daniel that would indicate any failure on Daniel's part to remain faithful and he had not been in Israel since he was a boy. He was around 80 years old now and had faithfully advanced his commitment to the Most High God throughout his entire life.

Yet he refused to separate himself from his people because that was part of his identity before God. Notice the constant use of the pronoun "we" throughout this prayer. Daniel loved his people and derived his identity from being part of the people of God and so he saw their sin as his sin as well. He was faultless as an individual but this was his people. They stood before God as a people and requested God's grace. Daniel understood that he could not disconnect his relationship with God from his status as part of God's people.

- Read 1 John 4:19-21
- What is the connection here made between the way we show loyalty to our fellow believers and how we really feel about God?
- How would you fare if God truly judged your love for him based on the way you love his people, as this verse teaches?
- Do you truly take corporate responsibility for your church or do you often separate yourself in your own mind as an individual and simply worry about how you are doing?
- Are your prayers primarily focused on yourself and your own needs or those of your people?

Time to Ponder

- Read and meditate on 1 John 3:16
- Write out one way that this passage challenges you as read it today.
- Write down one conviction that you can either make or renew in your life based on this study.

Humble Yourself - Day 43

Daniel 9:15-19

¹⁵ "Now, Lord our God, who brought your people out of Egypt with a mighty hand and who made for yourself a name that endures to this day, we have sinned, we have done wrong. ¹⁶ Lord, in keeping with all your righteous acts, turn away your anger and your wrath from Jerusalem, your city, your holy hill. Our sins and the iniquities of our ancestors have made Jerusalem and your people an object of scorn to all those around us.

¹⁷ "Now, our God, hear the prayers and petitions of your servant. For your sake, Lord, look with favor on your desolate sanctuary. ¹⁸ Give ear, our God, and hear; open your eyes and see the desolation of the city that bears your Name. We do not make requests of you because we are righteous, but because of your great mercy. ¹⁹ Lord, listen! Lord, forgive! Lord, hear and act! For your sake, my God, do not delay, because your city and your people bear your Name."

The television and radio media outlets lately have been abuzz with a certain famous actor who appears to be completely out of control in his personal life. He is repeatedly reported to be on drug binges; throwing out of control parties, involved in domestic abuse issues and more. What surprised me a bit, though, was one newscaster who pointed out how sad the whole affair is but then mentioned that we really must remember in all of this that we need to forgive him so that he can begin to turn his life around.

It was a nice sentiment, but completely wrongheaded, to be brutally honest. Despite the sentimentality that we often hear called for in these tragic types of situations, this goes against biblical principles. The reality is that someone cannot be truly forgiven until they first acknowledge their guilt and their sin, and repent. If someone will not humble themselves then they cannot be genuinely forgiven.

- Read Luke 17:3-4
- What is the prerequisite here before someone can be forgiven for their trespasses?
- Is this how you have normally thought about forgiveness?
- Why do you think that it is so important to expect repentance before forgiveness is truly offered to an offender?

Daniel went to God in prayer to confess the sins of his people. He didn't separate himself from them. Their sin was his sin. But he knew that what was ultimately needed was gracious forgiveness from God and mercy. Daniel's prayer is full of humility and confession. He went before God and acknowledged the sin of his people in living color. There is no sense of trying to put a good spin on things or make things look good when standing before God. Daniel knew that Israel had sinned and that they deserved God's wrath and he appealed to God for forgiveness that they did not deserve, knowing that God would have mercy on the humble.

This stands in such stark contrast to the normal human response which is to make excuses or to rationalize behavior and even become defensive. There is none of that in Daniel's prayer. All we see is humble contrition and the recognition that his people desperately needed to confess their sin to God and repent so that they could experience times of forgiveness.

The biblical reality is that we can never fully experience God's grace, mercy, and forgiveness until we humble ourselves and repent. God will not grant forgiveness to those that refuse to acknowledge their sin and seek forgiveness.

- Read Acts 2:37-39; Jeremiah 3:12-14
- What is the common principle in these two passages when it comes to coming in contact with God's forgiveness?
- Have there been any times in your life recently where you have failed to confess your sin and humbly repent either before God or other human beings (James 5:16)?
- What are the negative effects of refusing to humble ourselves deeply and truly before God?
- What can stand in the way of us humbling ourselves and seeking true forgiveness from God or from others? (Note Ephesians 4:32 which calls God's people to forgive in the same way that he forgives, which would include the requirement for repentance. When someone fails to repent they cannot truly be forgiven but we are called to rid ourselves of any bitterness or anger over it even though they cannot be fully forgiven until they repent.)

Time to Ponder

- Read and meditate on James 4:10
- Write out one way that this passage challenges you as read it today.
- Write down one conviction that you can either make or renew in your life based on this study.

Word of Understanding - Day 44

Daniel 9:20-23

²⁰ While I was speaking and praying, confessing my sin and the sin of my people Israel and making my request to the LORD my God for his holy hill— ²¹ while I was still in prayer, Gabriel, the man I had seen in the earlier vision, came to me in swift flight about the time of the evening sacrifice. ²² He instructed me and said to me, “Daniel, I have now come to give you insight and understanding. ²³ As soon as you began to pray, a word went out, which I have come to tell you, for you are highly esteemed. Therefore, consider the word and understand the vision

As I am sitting here working on this devotional, my youngest son is sitting next to me getting occasional help on his math homework. A few minutes ago he had a problem that had completely vexed and confused him. He had no idea where to start to go about understanding the problem. He was getting rather frustrated and asked for my help, but was really thinking that the problem was going to be impossible. After reading the problem, I gave him a couple of clues as to how to understand it and how to go about doing the problem. With those few clues, just a few simple words, he was able to quickly understand the problem and complete it.

Have you ever had a time in life that seemed confusing or vexing and you just didn't know what to do? Wouldn't it be great if we had a source of simple little helps and principles to which we could turn that would help us work through the difficult problems of life and understand things?

- To what do you turn to help you understand difficult problems?
- In what ways do you tend to turn to worldly wisdom?
- Does it ever seem easier to turn to worldly wisdom rather than God's word? Why do you think that might be?

Daniel was fervently in prayer and confessing the sins of his people to the Lord but was having a hard time understanding how this whole deal about God's judgment was going to eventually come to God's people and how those who were willing could be rescued. He needed insight and understanding and was still in prayer looking for it when Gabriel showed up to give him wisdom from the words of God.

It seems that it is fairly unlikely that any of us will be visited by Gabriel as we pray but the reality is that there are plenty of times when we are seeking God's will in certain situations or trying to understand what God is up to but we are just confused. The question is what do we do during those times? Do we turn to prayer and God's word looking for insight and understanding or do we trust on our own knowledge and wisdom?

- Read Psalm 119:105-112
- What role should the word of God play in our lives?
- Why is it so important to rely on the word of God for direction and insight rather than other sources?
- What can be the danger of relying on other sources of wisdom?

- Read Luke 16:31
- Jesus' reference to Moses and the prophets refers to the word of God?
- He saw it as being more effective in guiding people and bringing them to the truth than even their own experiences.
- Do you share the same respect and reverence for the power of God in your own life?

As we face each new day, there are plenty of mysteries that will confront us. There will be things that we don't understand and won't know what to do. The key is allowing the word of God to give us insight. It is a matter of allowing the Scriptures to determine for us what is truth and what is right rather than anything else.

Time to Ponder

- Read and meditate on Proverbs 3:5-6
- Write out one way that this passage challenges you as read it today.
- Write down one conviction that you can either make or renew in your life based on this study.

The Only Way - Day 45

Daniel 9:24-27

²⁴ "Seventy 'sevens'^[a] are decreed for your people and your holy city to finish^[d] transgression, to put an end to sin, to atone for wickedness, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal up vision and prophecy and to anoint the Most Holy Place.^[e]

²⁵ "Know and understand this: From the time the word goes out to restore and rebuild Jerusalem until the Anointed One,^[f] the ruler, comes, there will be seven 'sevens,' and sixty-two 'sevens.' It will be rebuilt with streets and a trench, but in times of trouble. ²⁶ After the sixty-two 'sevens,' the Anointed One will be put to death and will have nothing.^[g] The people of the ruler who will come will destroy the city and the sanctuary. The end will come like a flood: War will continue until the end, and desolations have been decreed. ²⁷ He will confirm a covenant with many for one 'seven.'^[h] In the middle of the 'seven'^[i] he will put an end to sacrifice and offering. And at the temple^[j] he will set up an abomination that causes desolation, until the end that is decreed is poured out on him.^[k]"^[l]

The other day I was riding in a car with a friend who was driving whilst being quite engaged in a conversation with myself and some others who were in the car. He suddenly started to turn left to get where we were going which would have been fine except for the small detail that it was a one-way road that went only in the other direction. We quickly alerted him to this problem and he corrected course.

What is so easy to figure out when we are driving, however, seems much more difficult when it comes to finding God. If there is only one way, then that's just the way it is. No one questions that when driving somewhere. There is only one road to get into my son's high school complex and no one seems to argue that or question it. It's reality. But tell people that there is only one way to God and you quickly have a fight on your hands. People don't want to hear that Jesus said that he is the only way to the Father (Jn. 14:6). That's just offensive to them and it can be one of the most difficult truths of Christianity for us to hold firmly in our convictions.

- Do you ever find it difficult or uncomfortable to declare your conviction that Jesus is the only way to the Father? Do you truly hold that as your conviction?
- Why do you think that idea can be so offensive to people?
- Read John 14:6
- What does this mean for all other philosophies and religions?

A lot of people can get extremely hung up on the specifics of this passage and the timing of the seventy "sevens," especially the odd details about sixty-two "sevens," then another seven "sevens," and finally a last "seven" that has the terrible abomination that causes desolation (one that mimics Antiochus Ephiphanes' horrible acts in the Temple in 8:13). It is obviously outside the scope of this devotional study to delve into all of those topics in any detail at all but the broad sweep of this passage is what is truly important.

The point is that in Daniel 8 the terrible reign of Antiochus Epihanes is described during a time when God leaving the Temple and the people of Israel to themselves. That is only a foreshadowing of the time of the Messiah's coming. That time will be wonderful and terrible all at the same time. The Messiah will put an end to sin and the sacrificial system and will establish his everlasting righteousness and eternal kingdom. But it will also mean the destruction of the Temple and the city that claimed to be the people of God and thought themselves as such. Another time would come when God would leave the Temple desolated once and for all.

This final abandoning of the Temple would show once-and-for-all that Jesus truly was the Messiah and the Son of God and that those who would follow him really are God's people. In short, the counter-balancing events of the exaltation of the Messiah and the destruction of the city and the sanctuary would be a clear indication that Jesus was and will forever be the only way to the Father. The age of the Old Covenant would truly come to an end and the new age of the everlasting righteousness of the Messiah would be established forever.

- Read Matthew 24:1-35
- Many people assume that this passage is referring to the end of the world but the context clearly has to do with the destruction of the Temple, the end of the Old Covenant Age, and the sign that the Son of Man is truly enthroned in heaven and is the only way to the Father (the true meaning of verse 30 despite some misleading modern translations of that verse).

The idea that Israel as a nation would be brought low and that the Messiah would be clearly shown through this terrible time to be the only way to God was deeply distressing to Daniel and it was monumentally offensive to the Jews of Jesus' day.

For different reasons it is still just as offensive in our day and time to declare that Jesus the Messiah is the only way to the Father and his followers, although not anything special in and of themselves, are the only true people of God. It took great courage for the Christians of Jesus' day to hold firmly to that truth and it takes just as much courage and conviction for us to hold to it in our pluralistic times when declaring one way to be the truth is considered among the most offensive and arrogant of all possible behaviors. It is important for us to know that this was always God's plan. He always planned to have a people in Christ and that is the only way to be saved.

Time to Ponder

- Read and meditate on Ephesians 1:3-10
- Write out one way that this passage challenges and/or encourages you as read it today.
- Write down one conviction that you can either make or renew in your life based on this study.

Keeping Your Passion - Day 46

Daniel 10:1-3

¹ In the third year of Cyrus king of Persia, a revelation was given to Daniel (who was called Belteshazzar). Its message was true and it concerned a great war.^[a] The understanding of the message came to him in a vision.

² At that time I, Daniel, mourned for three weeks. ³ I ate no choice food; no meat or wine touched my lips; and I used no lotions at all until the three weeks were over.

I'm certainly not the first person to notice this but I've always been amazed at how passionate a stadium full of football fans can get during a big football game, how intense an arena full of basketball fans can be as they jump up and down throughout the game, or even how long a movie audience can sit without thought of moving or falling asleep during a picture show. Yet, when we come to worship God on Sunday morning, we suddenly get very withdrawn and without passion and we convince ourselves that to have to sit in one place for an hour and a half is cruel and unusual punishment that must be endured.

I'm not advocating that Christians should turn their worship gatherings into pep rallies and engage in false hysteria or emotion but it should be a warning sign if we are not getting passionate about our faith (there is, of course, a reality that different people express their passion in different ways).

- Read Romans 12:9-13
- Why do you think Paul urges Christians to never be lacking in zeal?
- What are some of the things that can drain our zeal?
- How does one go about keeping their spiritual fervor?
- How does the topic of zeal and spiritual fervor relate to the other things mentioned in this passage in Romans?

We already know that Daniel was a man that was deeply committed to following God and remaining loyal despite great cost to himself. But passages like this show us just how passionate about God's people and how zealous for God Daniel was. When he realized that this vision was basically decreeing that a time would come when the Messiah would appear but that would also mean that Israel would lose her status as God's people and that the great city of Jerusalem and the Temple would be brought low, Daniel mourned, prayed, fasted, and was an emotional wreck for three weeks. He was that passionate about the things of God.

This is a great challenge for those of us who can so easily become numb in our walk with God. We can have Bible study times or prayer times that are consistently void of any real effort or passion. We start to go through the motions with vague feelings of fondness for God and his people but no deep love or emotional connection anymore. We can get so anesthetized to the plight of the lost that we barely bat an eye when someone rejects God or walks away from his people.

That certainly doesn't imply that we are all like that in all of those ways or even some of them but it can certainly be a reality for some of us in some ways at some time in our Christian lives. Losing our zeal and our spiritual fervor is a very real danger and can be deadly spiritually.

- Read Luke 24:32
- When is the last time that your heart burned within you as you read the word of God, listened to a sermon, or prayed?
- What do you think causes someone's heart to burn within them?
- What do you do when feel like you have lost your spiritual passion?
- Read 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18
- How does the concept of praying continually relate to keeping one's spiritual zeal and fervor?
- What are the things that kill your spiritual passion?
- What do you do to combat that?

Keeping our spiritual zeal, fervor, and passion is vital to our walk with God. We must constantly take measures to ensure that our walk with God is not losing its emotion and becoming routine for us.

- Spend some time today considering these four areas where your spiritual passion may need to be revived:
 - Spiritual passion needs reviving when we are neglecting our commitments. What spiritual commitments have you made that are now forgotten? You used to feel guilty that you didn't follow through but now you don't even do that. Where once you could be counted on now you are counted out--that's a place where your spiritual passion needs reviving.
 - Our spiritual passion needs reviving where we are deliberately resisting God's leadership. The Spirit of God has marked off some boundaries in your life or given you a clear direction and you have stepped over the line or gone the opposite way. God has said "no" in some area of your life but you are willfully saying, "yes".
 - Our spiritual passion needs reviving where we are ignoring the things that keep our relationship with God strong. Ignoring worship gatherings, reading God's word for your own spiritual nourishment, ignoring personal times of private prayer, and ignoring opportunities to demonstrate our devotion to Christ through witnessing, giving or serving. When our passion weakens in any of those areas it's not long before we discover we are out of touch with God.
 - Finally, our spiritual passion needs reviving where it's evident we are ineffective. You can only fake being spiritual so long. Sooner or later you are put in a situation where it all catches up to you.

Time to Ponder

- Read and meditate on Isaiah 40:30-31
- Write out one way that this passage challenges you as read it today.
- Write down one conviction that you can either make or renew in your life based on this study.

Helpless, not Hopeless - Day 47

Daniel 10:4-9

⁴ On the twenty-fourth day of the first month, as I was standing on the bank of the great river, the Tigris, ⁵ I looked up and there before me was a man dressed in linen, with a belt of fine gold from Uphaz around his waist. ⁶ His body was like topaz, his face like lightning, his eyes like flaming torches, his arms and legs like the gleam of burnished bronze, and his voice like the sound of a multitude.

⁷ I, Daniel, was the only one who saw the vision; those who were with me did not see it, but such terror overwhelmed them that they fled and hid themselves. ⁸ So I was left alone, gazing at this great vision; I had no strength left, my face turned deathly pale and I was helpless. ⁹ Then I heard him speaking, and as I listened to him, I fell into a deep sleep, my face to the ground.

My youngest son was really struggling with a difficult math problem this morning. He typically finds math rather easy but he is in an advanced math class with students that are 1 and 2 grades ahead of him and he now often brings home homework that is quite challenging for him. His problem this morning, though, was a mixture between struggling with the problem and being frustrated with that and the fact that he would not let go of his pride. I was trying to help him by giving him a few clues of how to proceed but he did not want to listen. He still wanted to do the problem his way, which was never going to get him the right answer and he just did not want to be open to doing it a different way. So he found himself in the untenable position of knowing that he could not do the problem but also not yet at the point where he was really open to receiving the help he needed.

His core problem was that he did not yet become helpless in his mind. He still thought that he could do it and so he was resistant to truly receiving help. In fact, it's often that way in life. We cannot really get the help that we need in many cases until we can recognize that we are helpless and cannot do it by ourselves.

- Why do you think that human beings are generally so resistant to admit or recognize our own repentance?
- What is it about feeling helpless that you personally don't like?

In describing his vision, Daniel once again found himself in the overwhelming presence of one that sounds very much like the Ancient of Days from chapter 7 and the description of Jesus in Revelation 1. Daniel was in the presence of others but he was the only one who was allowed to see in the spiritual realm as the curtain was pulled back so that he could see this heavenly vision.

After being in the presence of this heavenly being prepared to see another incredible vision, Daniel found himself helpless. This is exactly where he needed to be. There was no hint of pride in Daniel. There was no sense that he could figure all of this out by himself or that he didn't need God. Daniel's encounter with the mighty God left him appropriately feeling helpless.

That might sound like a bad thing but that is exactly where Daniel had to be in order to be used by God. It is exactly where we need to be to be used by God. When we don't think we're helpless before God and completely reliant upon him for strength, then we will try to accomplish things on our strength. It is only when we recognize our own helplessness that we can really be used by God.

- Matthew 9:36
- What moved Jesus to help and have compassion on this crowd?
- 2 Corinthians 12:9-12
- What is the correlation that Paul makes here between our own perceived strength and God being able to use us and make us strong?
- What are the areas in your life where you can at times be tempted to think that you are strong and not helpless?
- What is the result when you think that you are capable and strong?
- Why do you think that God demands recognition of our own weakness before he can truly strengthen us?
- What keeps you from going before God with a helpless attitude that is completely reliant on his strength and power?

Time to Ponder

- Read and meditate on Psalm 29:10-11
- Write out one way that this passage challenges and/or encourages you as read it today.
- Write down one conviction that you can either make or renew in your life based on this study.

Do Not Be Afraid - Day 48

Daniel 10:10-14

¹⁰ A hand touched me and set me trembling on my hands and knees. ¹¹ He said, “Daniel, you who are highly esteemed, consider carefully the words I am about to speak to you, and stand up, for I have now been sent to you.” And when he said this to me, I stood up trembling.

¹² Then he continued, “Do not be afraid, Daniel. Since the first day that you set your mind to gain understanding and to humble yourself before your God, your words were heard, and I have come in response to them. ¹³ But the prince of the Persian kingdom resisted me twenty-one days. Then Michael, one of the chief princes, came to help me, because I was detained there with the king of Persia. ¹⁴ Now I have come to explain to you what will happen to your people in the future, for the vision concerns a time yet to come.”

Many years ago I was warming up for a summer basketball tournament. I knew most of the players on our team although one friend had a friend of his that was going to play with us that I hadn't met yet. We didn't know who the other team was at all. As most of us had arrived early went out to shoot around a bit before the regular pre-game warm ups. There was huge player down on the other side of the court by himself that had come to warm up as well. This player was nearly seven feet tall and looked very good. We were quite scared as we watched him warm up because we assumed he was on the team that we were playing. Then our friend arrived and had a good laugh as he told us that this was his friend and that the big guy was playing with us. We had nothing to fear because this guy was playing for us. Our fear rather instantly turned to comfort.

The Bible certainly demands that people have a proper fear of God that we should always maintain. But it can also seem confusing because there are many times when a messenger from God will tell the righteous person with whom they are talking to not fear, everything will be okay. That's not a contradiction. We should always maintain a constant and reverent awareness of the presence of the almighty God but there is a great comfort that should come when we know that God is with us.

- Read Romans 8:31
- What are some specific ways in your life that you can tend to forget that God is for us?
- What does it mean to say that God is for us? Does it mean that everything in your life will go trouble-free? What does it mean then?

Daniel's response to the arrival of God's messenger was rather sensible. He was filled with fear. He was afraid not just at the presence of the divine messenger but at the thought of the content of the visions that he was receiving as well. He had already received some rather disturbing visions regarding the future of his people, the nation of Israel, and he was fearful at what he was going to hear this time. But he had forgotten one thing. As frightening as things might seem, God was sovereign and that meant that everything was in control. Daniel had no reason to fear.

- What two factors does the heavenly messenger commend David for as being key components to him not needing to be afraid?
- What do you feel is the connection between those two elements and the fact that God heard his prayers?
- Read Psalm 34:17; Proverbs 15:29; John 9:31
- What do you think these scriptures mean by declaring the principle that God is far from the wicked but hears the righteous?
- If God hears the righteous what should this do to the fear, anxiety, and worry that we can often suffer through?

How often do you struggle with fear? Do you have fear over your circumstances or what is going to happen, or with what God is doing in your life? Oftentimes fear stems from the fact that we don't feel like we have heard or seen God's response to our prayers. Notice that the messenger reminds Daniel that he did have his mind set on understanding God's words and that he approached God in humility and that he could rest assured because of those things, that God had heard his prayer immediately. We often need that reminder. Don't forget that the major theme of the book of Daniel is that God is sovereign. If God is sovereign and has promised to hear and respond to the prayers of his people then there is no need to fear anything.

Time to Ponder

- Read and meditate on 1 John 4:16-18
- Write out one way that this passage challenges you as read it today.
- Write down one conviction that you can either make or renew in your life based on this study.

Plugged In - Day 49

Daniel 10:15-19

¹⁵ While he was saying this to me, I bowed with my face toward the ground and was speechless. ¹⁶ Then one who looked like a man^[b] touched my lips, and I opened my mouth and began to speak. I said to the one standing before me, "I am overcome with anguish because of the vision, my lord, and I feel very weak. ¹⁷ How can I, your servant, talk with you, my lord? My strength is gone and I can hardly breathe."

¹⁸ Again the one who looked like a man touched me and gave me strength. ¹⁹ "Do not be afraid, you who are highly esteemed," he said. "Peace! Be strong now; be strong."

When he spoke to me, I was strengthened and said, "Speak, my lord, since you have given me strength."

A few months ago I had a great deal of work to do one day so I plugged in my computer underneath the side table next to our couch and began to work. I very quickly noticed, however, that my computer was indicating that it was nearly out of battery life and needed to be plugged in. I thought that was strange so I checked the connection into my computer and then crawled under the table and checked to make sure that the cord was plugged into the wall. Both connections were fine so I spent the next several minutes trying to run diagnostics on my computer and see what the problem was. I just could not figure it out so I started trying to pull the battery out and check that but it all seemed fine. Then I happened to move quickly which pulled the cord and lo and behold the end that should have been plugged into the wall came tumbling out. I quickly looked back under the table and saw that a computer cord was still plugged into the wall just where I had put it. As I looked more carefully I realized that the cord for my wife's computer was under there but not connected to her computer. I had plugged her cord into the wall and had never plugged mine in at all.

Where you get your energy from makes a difference. It may not seem like a big deal but it does matter. I thought my cord was plugged into the source of its strength but it wasn't and it was quickly moving towards dying without the proper source of strength and energy. As human beings, we are no different. We also need to be plugged into the right source of strength.

- Read 1 Chronicles 16:8-11
- To whom or what do you turn when you need strength?
- What are things other than God that you tend to turn to when you need strength?
- What are some of the perceived advantages (at least at the time) in turning to someone or something other than God for strength?

As Daniel is preparing to have another vision revealed to him, he has realized that he is weak and feeling overcome. His strength was gone and he didn't think that he could take anymore. Have you ever felt like that? It's easy to wear down when we encounter more

and more challenging news as Daniel was continuing to do. But then he learned a very important lesson; one that we should remember well.

God is sovereign and he is the one who is in control regardless of how terrible the situation seems to be going. So it only makes sense that the Lord is the one from whom we should receive our strength. Just when Daniel thought he couldn't take any more, the heavenly messenger touched him and gave him strength. If Daniel had sought strength from any other source the results would have likely been disastrous. It is only the Lord who can truly give us the strength that we need.

- Read each of the following passages and record your own insights into each one. What did you learn from it? How does it challenge you? How does it encourage you?
- Read Exodus 15:2
- Read 2 Chronicles 16:9
- Read Psalm 27:7-8
- What are the potential dangers involved with seeking our strength or comfort from a source other than our God?

Time to Ponder

- Read and meditate on Psalm 105:4
- Write out one way that this passage challenges you as read it today.
- Write down one conviction that you can either make or renew in your life based on this study.

The Spiritual Battle - Day 50

Daniel 10:20-11:1

²⁰ So he said, "Do you know why I have come to you? Soon I will return to fight against the prince of Persia, and when I go, the prince of Greece will come;²¹ but first I will tell you what is written in the Book of Truth. (No one supports me against them except Michael, your prince.)

Daniel 11

¹ And in the first year of Darius the Mede, I took my stand to support and protect him.)

Ephesians 6:12 is, in my opinion, one of the most intriguing and potentially enigmatic verses in all of Scripture. It reminds us that "our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms." We know that biblically speaking "flesh and blood" is the normal fallen state of humanity and communities so what on earth did Paul mean by implying that this is not our real struggle but that it is really against the evil spiritual forces in the heavenly realms?

It's a question worth considering at this point because much of Daniel 10 focuses on this spiritual battle. We can easily go wrong, however, if we misunderstand the nature of the battle in the heavenly realm. It is not like battle in our realm but has more to do with our realm than with the heavenly realm itself. When the Bible talks of angels, whether fallen angels or heaven's angels, doing battle it means that the battle is taking place here on earth. That doesn't mean that it's some invisible sword fight but that they are vying to influence humans through their mental battle. They are seeking to gain influence over humans and to encourage them to either do God's will or their own. The spiritual battle takes place in the minds of man.

- Read Ephesians 6:10-20
- What things does Paul cite as being our weapons in this battle of the mind?
- Why is the word of God and prayer given such a priority of importance in the spiritual battle?
- How do those two things help you specifically during times of intense spiritual battle?

The story of the spiritual battle taking place in Daniel is a bit complicated to follow but it can be boiled down to understanding that the thrust of the spiritual battle had to do with God's will being obeyed by freeing the people of Israel from their exile and allowing them to return to Jerusalem to rebuild the Temple. Cyrus had been prophesied by the prophet Isaiah to do God's will and bring about just such a time (Isa. 44:28; 45:1, 13). But there were others directly under Cyrus who were falling prey to the influence of the fallen

angels, here referred to as the princes of Persia and Greece. It was Gabriel and Michael who were doing battle with these evil influences.

Cyrus had indeed begun the process of fulfilling the prophecies of Isaiah but one of Cyrus' powerful regents sought to upend those plans while Cyrus was away. Daniel knew that this great battle was raging and was encouraged by his heavenly messenger to continue to turn to God's word and prayer. In many ways that is the primary theme of Daniel chapter 10.

The battle raged and we are told earlier in the chapter that it took Michael and Gabriel three weeks to persuade Cyrus to continue on with God's will and to counteract the influence that the evil princes had gained over his underlings. Cyrus had been strengthened and God's will would carry on. The important thing is that Daniel found that once again turning to God in prayer truly makes a difference in the spiritual battle.

- Would you classify yourself as a prayer warrior?
- Do you pray as consistently as you would like? If not what keeps you from doing so?
- Why do you think that prayer is such an important element in the spiritual battle?
- What happens to you personally in your spiritual life when you fail to pray consistently?
- What happens to you personally when you walk closely with God in prayer?

Time to Ponder

- Read and meditate on Ephesians 6:18
- Write out one way that this passage challenges you as read it today.
- Write down one conviction that you can either make or renew in your life based on this study.

What is to Come - Day 51

Daniel 11:2-20

² "Now then, I tell you the truth: Three more kings will arise in Persia, and then a fourth, who will be far richer than all the others. When he has gained power by his wealth, he will stir up everyone against the kingdom of Greece. ³ Then a mighty king will arise, who will rule with great power and do as he pleases. ⁴ After he has arisen, his empire will be broken up and parceled out toward the four winds of heaven. It will not go to his descendants, nor will it have the power he exercised, because his empire will be uprooted and given to others.

⁵ "The king of the South will become strong, but one of his commanders will become even stronger than he and will rule his own kingdom with great power. ⁶ After some years, they will become allies. The daughter of the king of the South will go to the king of the North to make an alliance, but she will not retain her power, and he and his power^[a] will not last. In those days she will be betrayed, together with her royal escort and her father^[a] and the one who supported her.

⁷ "One from her family line will arise to take her place. He will attack the forces of the king of the North and enter his fortress; he will fight against them and be victorious. ⁸ He will also seize their gods, their metal images and their valuable articles of silver and gold and carry them off to Egypt. For some years he will leave the king of the North alone. ⁹ Then the king of the North will invade the realm of the king of the South but will retreat to his own country. ¹⁰ His sons will prepare for war and assemble a great army, which will sweep on like an irresistible flood and carry the battle as far as his fortress.

¹¹ "Then the king of the South will march out in a rage and fight against the king of the North, who will raise a large army, but it will be defeated. ¹² When the army is carried off, the king of the South will be filled with pride and will slaughter many thousands, yet he will not remain triumphant. ¹³ For the king of the North will muster another army, larger than the first; and after several years, he will advance with a huge army fully equipped.

¹⁴ "In those times many will rise against the king of the South. Those who are violent among your own people will rebel in fulfillment of the vision, but without success. ¹⁵ Then the king of the North will come and build up siege ramps and will capture a fortified city. The forces of the South will be powerless to resist; even their best troops will not have the strength to stand. ¹⁶ The invader will do as he pleases; no one will be able to stand against him. He will establish himself in the Beautiful Land and will have the power to destroy it. ¹⁷ He will determine to come with the might of his entire kingdom and will make an alliance with the king of the South. And he will give him a daughter in marriage in order to overthrow the kingdom, but his plans^[d] will not succeed or help him. ¹⁸ Then he will turn his attention to the coastlands and will take many of them, but a commander will put an end to his insolence and will turn his insolence back on him. ¹⁹ After this, he will turn back toward the fortresses of his own country but will stumble and fall, to be seen no more.

²⁰ "His successor will send out a tax collector to maintain the royal splendor. In a few years, however, he will be destroyed, yet not in anger or in battle.

Prophecies were quite common and popular in the ancient world. That's why the Old Testament warns the nation of Israel repeatedly against false prophets and tells them to watch out for the dangers of false prophecies. But before we jump to being judgmental about the ancient people, we have to remember that the prophetic is big business in our world today. Television shows make big ratings by having popular psychics on, magazines sell by the millions with the new predictions for the upcoming year, people spend billions of dollars on phone and live psychics, and even different offshoots of Christianity have gotten into the business of prophesying the dates of the end of the world and similar things.

The constant standard of the Bible when it comes to the prophetic is as clear as it is stringent. If the prophet makes a prediction, even one, that does not come to pass, then

the prophet is exposed a false prophet. It's that simple and clear. If that standard was truly applied to all prophets everywhere, the prophetic business would pretty much disappear overnight. That means that looking at the prophecies of the Bible, like those found in the book of Daniel, are important proofs that the Bible is indeed the word of God and is something to be respected and revered.

- Read Deuteronomy 18:21-22
- Why would God give such a strict rule of thumb with absolutely no wiggle room when it comes to judging prophets?
- Have you ever been tempted to look at prophecies, psychics, or similar things? What would happen if you applied the principle of Deuteronomy 18 to those folks?
- What does a false or incorrect prophecy tell us about the one giving it?

The fulfillment of the prophecies given in Daniel 11 is so detailed and stunning that we couldn't possibly go into them all. The first part that we are looking at today deals with the history of the Ancient Near East from the time of Daniel up until the time of Antiochus Epiphanes. It opens with a prediction of four kings, who time would later reveal to be Cambyses (529-523 BC); Gumata (523-522 BC); Darius the Great (522-485 BC), and finally the fourth king, Xerxes (485-464 BC), who was far richer than the others. After a time, a mighty king would arise, we now know this to be Alexander the Great. His mighty empire could be divided and given to those who were not his descendants just as the vision prophesied. Verses 6-9 speak of Bernice, the daughter of Ptolemy II and predicts perfectly the details of her life. The remaining verses go on to predict specific events that would be precisely fulfilled in history.

The truth of this prophecies and the ability to verify them are important for three reasons. The first is that these prophecies are made in the name of the Most High God. If they are true as history shows them to be, then it is verification that this is the true God and not another, as no other could do this. Second, is that these prophecies being fulfilled as they were demonstrates that the Bible in which they are recorded is the word of the Most High, the true God. Third, the fulfillment of these prophecies reveals that the God who disclosed these events and brought them about was able to keep his word and promises to his people.

- Read 2 Peter 1:19-21
- What does this passage tell us about God and prophecy?
- How does reading prophecies and seeing their fulfillments help to strengthen our faith in God and his word?
- How can biblical prophecies actually be used effectively in evangelism?

Time to Ponder

- Read and meditate on 2 Peter 2:1-3
- Write out one way that this passage challenges you as read it today.
- Write down one conviction that you can either make or renew in your life based on this study.

Training Day - Day 52

Daniel 11:21-35

²¹ “He will be succeeded by a contemptible person who has not been given the honor of royalty. He will invade the kingdom when its people feel secure, and he will seize it through intrigue. ²² Then an overwhelming army will be swept away before him; both it and a prince of the covenant will be destroyed. ²³ After coming to an agreement with him, he will act deceitfully, and with only a few people he will rise to power. ²⁴ When the richest provinces feel secure, he will invade them and will achieve what neither his fathers nor his forefathers did. He will distribute plunder, loot and wealth among his followers. He will plot the overthrow of fortresses—but only for a time.

²⁵ “With a large army he will stir up his strength and courage against the king of the South. The king of the South will wage war with a large and very powerful army, but he will not be able to stand because of the plots devised against him. ²⁶ Those who eat from the king’s provisions will try to destroy him; his army will be swept away, and many will fall in battle. ²⁷ The two kings, with their hearts bent on evil, will sit at the same table and lie to each other, but to no avail, because an end will still come at the appointed time. ²⁸ The king of the North will return to his own country with great wealth, but his heart will be set against the holy covenant. He will take action against it and then return to his own country.

²⁹ “At the appointed time he will invade the South again, but this time the outcome will be different from what it was before. ³⁰ Ships of the western coastlands will oppose him, and he will lose heart. Then he will turn back and vent his fury against the holy covenant. He will return and show favor to those who forsake the holy covenant.

³¹ “His armed forces will rise up to desecrate the temple fortress and will abolish the daily sacrifice. Then they will set up the abomination that causes desolation. ³² With flattery he will corrupt those who have violated the covenant, but the people who know their God will firmly resist him.

³³ “Those who are wise will instruct many, though for a time they will fall by the sword or be burned or captured or plundered. ³⁴ When they fall, they will receive a little help, and many who are not sincere will join them. ³⁵ Some of the wise will stumble, so that they may be refined, purified and made spotless until the time of the end, for it will still come at the appointed time.

Have you ever had an exercise regimen that you really needed to follow but just did not enjoy it very much and found it to be a constant struggle? I know some people who enjoy exercise but many people find regular exercise very difficult and even mildly torturous. Constant training that is extremely demanding rarely seems enjoyable but it is necessary in order to reach high standards of physical fitness.

This same principle is true of the way that God works with his people in life. He uses situations, often very difficult and painful ones, to train us and exercise us into becoming the strong people that he desires for us to be. The discipline of this training is rarely pleasant but it does complete God’s purposes for us and makes us complete in becoming the people that he wants us to be.

- Read Hebrews 12:4-11
- The word translated “discipline” means “train”. How does this help us to understand this passage a little more fully?
- What is the purpose of struggles and trials in our lives according to this passage?
- To what purpose is God “training” us?

As Daniel continues going through his prophetic vision, he comes, in this section, to the time of Antiochus Epiphanes. Antiochus Epiphanes was mentioned in an earlier vision in the vision of the ram and goat in Daniel 8. As the prophecies predict, and history confirms, Antiochus would easily advance early in his life through intrigue, deceit, and easy victories. Later on, Antiochus Epiphanes would be turned back in Egypt and humiliated by the Romans. This left Antiochus furious and embarrassed, determined to redeem himself so, unable to defeat the Romans, he turned his anger towards Jerusalem.

He took 20,000 men to Jerusalem and defeated the city, stopped all Temple worship, and even sacrificed a pig to the gods on the Temple altar. This was the “abomination that causes desolation” of verse 31. Some would go along with his blasphemies and it would cause others to rise up against the desecration, such as an eventual successful rebellion led by Judas Maccabeus.

This would be a terrible time of testing for God’s people but was not without purpose. God’s people had drifted from him and needed to be disciplined and trained once again. Only such difficult circumstances would accomplish that. It would not be pleasant at all but this training would cause those faithful to God to rise up.

We may go through difficult circumstances and unpleasant spiritual training in our own lives but those times are not without merit or purpose. God uses those times to train us and discipline us. It is only through difficult times and even suffering that we can become complete or “perfect” in God’s ability to use us according to his plans.

- What are you going through right now that is a difficult situation but through which God might be training you?
- Read Hebrews 2:10-13
- If Jesus was made “complete” or “perfect” through the trial of the Cross what does that mean for us as we face the possibility of going through times of training and discipline?

Time to Ponder

- Read and meditate on James 1:2-4
- Write out one way that this passage challenges you as read it today.
- Write down one conviction that you can either make or renew in your life based on this study.

Real or Fake? - Day 53

Daniel 11:36-45

³⁶ “The king will do as he pleases. He will exalt and magnify himself above every god and will say unheard-of things against the God of gods. He will be successful until the time of wrath is completed, for what has been determined must take place. ³⁷ He will show no regard for the gods of his ancestors or for the one desired by women, nor will he regard any god, but will exalt himself above them all. ³⁸ Instead of them, he will honor a god of fortresses; a god unknown to his ancestors he will honor with gold and silver, with precious stones and costly gifts. ³⁹ He will attack the mightiest fortresses with the help of a foreign god and will greatly honor those who acknowledge him. He will make them rulers over many people and will distribute the land at a price.^[a]

⁴⁰ “At the time of the end the king of the South will engage him in battle, and the king of the North will storm out against him with chariots and cavalry and a great fleet of ships. He will invade many countries and sweep through them like a flood. ⁴¹ He will also invade the Beautiful Land. Many countries will fall, but Edom, Moab and the leaders of Ammon will be delivered from his hand. ⁴² He will extend his power over many countries; Egypt will not escape. ⁴³ He will gain control of the treasures of gold and silver and all the riches of Egypt, with the Libyans and Cushites^[a] in submission. ⁴⁴ But reports from the east and the north will alarm him, and he will set out in a great rage to destroy and annihilate many. ⁴⁵ He will pitch his royal tents between the seas at^[f] the beautiful holy mountain. Yet he will come to his end, and no one will help him.

A few years ago a movie came out called “Catch Me if You Can.” The movie chronicled the exploits of an accomplished counterfeiter who was eventually captured by the FBI and then was released from prison so that he could work for the FBI to help them stop and capture other counterfeiters. What made him so valuable was his uncanny ability to immediately spot counterfeit money and documents based on the smallest details and tiniest mistakes. He could catch things that most people would never even notice.

The man depicted in that movie was an expert at recognizing the counterfeit but for most people, the best way to recognize a counterfeit is to hold it up next to an original. The differences quickly become quite evident. Whenever the Bible speaks of kings or of other gods, one of the things that we are always encouraged to do is to hold that image up next to the true God or to Jesus, the true King of the world and to see the differences. When we do that, the differences become quite clear, even if there are many other things about a passage that we don’t understand.

- Read 1 Samuel 8:10-18
- What are the characteristics of an earthly king that will come to pass in Israel according to this passage?
- Read Psalm 74:12; 118:1-14
- What glaring differences stand out between earthly kings and the Lord as a true King?

This next section of Daniel’s prophecy, going into the beginning of chapter 12, is among the most disputed passages in all of Scripture. Some people claim that Daniel switches

gears in verse 36 and begins to speak of the times of the end of the world and a supposed “anti-Christ” figure. Others claim that Daniel is continuing to speak of Antiochus Epiphanes here. Still others think that the king spoken of is Herod the great, while still others take it to refer collectively and symbolically to the Roman Empire. Nearly all of these interpretations have difficulties that come with it and it is virtually impossible to be dogmatic on any one interpretation.

We can, however, fairly safely conclude that reading this as solely pointing to the end times of the world and some “anti-Christ” figure is the weakest and least likely conclusion. Without the room to go into all of the details here, the safest conclusion is that the king spoken of here is a symbol of Rome, although at times, the events prophesied are so closely connected with Herod the Great, the Roman vassal king of Israel, that it is difficult to really distinguish the two.

As important as the specific prophecies can be, the main point is that this prophecy was pointing to the coming of the Messiah. Daniel was giving clear markers for the coming of the Messiah but also drawing a clear distinction between the powerful type kings who do as they please and the true King that would be the Messiah. That is the truly important information. On the one hand, we have earthly kings who will commit any kind of intrigue or violence to gain power. On the other hand will be the Messiah who will bring everlasting life.

- Read Isaiah 9:6-7
- What are the differences between the description of this king and the king spoken of in Daniel 11:36-45?
- Why, despite the obvious differences, do you think people are so quick to yoke themselves to an earthly king or power other than the true King of the world?

Time to Ponder

- Read and meditate on Revelation 21:1-7.
- Write out one way that this passage challenges or encourages you as read it today.
- Write down one conviction that you can either make or renew in your life based on this study.

At That Time - Day 54

Daniel 12:1-4

¹ "At that time Michael, the great prince who protects your people, will arise. There will be a time of distress such as has not happened from the beginning of nations until then. But at that time your people—everyone whose name is found written in the book—will be delivered. ² Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt. ³ Those who are wise^[a] will shine like the brightness of the heavens, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever. ⁴ But you, Daniel, roll up and seal the words of the scroll until the time of the end. Many will go here and there to increase knowledge."

Throughout his ministry on earth, Jesus repeatedly laid out the principle for his disciples that they could not live two lives at once. They had their own lives driven by their own will and then there was the life of Christ which is characterized by doing God's will. They could only have one which meant that if they wanted the life of Christ they would have to lay down their own lives and die to themselves. Only then could they enter into and embrace the life of Christ. It has to be one life or the other. It is our choice. But whichever life we live on earth, ours or the life of Christ, is the one by which we will be judged.

Just as we must choose between one of two lives because we can live only one, so God has always declared that he would have only one people. God chose Israel to be his people because of his mercy, not because of anything special that they did (Deut. 7:7-8). God had chosen Israel to be his faithful servant but when they failed it didn't mean that God's plan had gone off the tracks (Rom. 3:3-4). God had chosen the Messiah to be the representative for his people which would still live up to God's promises. Not all Israel was the true Israel but the Messiah was, and that was enough (Rom. 9:6). There would be a time when all of God's promises to bless the whole world through his one promised family would be fulfilled (Gen. 12:1-3).

This prophecy looks forward to that time. It is the time when Michael, the great protecting angel of the people of Israel, would rise up and bring about the Messiah. He was not, of course, the Messiah, but he would help bring the Messiah safely to the world. At that time, Israel would be raised from the dead, so to speak, and would be able to choose between being God's people or not. But the nation of Israel would no longer automatically be God's people. The Messiah was the true Israel and they would have to come to him to be raised to the eternal life of God's people (Jn. 3:36) that was found only in the Messiah. It was only in him that they would shine like stars forever (Phil. 2:15).

At first glance, it is easy to think that this prophecy has to do with the final resurrection to the end of times. I used to understand it in that way as well, but in full context of the passage it seems unlikely. The prophecies of Daniel have to do with the coming of the Messiah. The national resurrection of some of the people of Israel (like the scene in Ezek. 37) at the time of the Messiah certainly foreshadows the final resurrection but they are not one in the same event. It is a prophecy of the time when some from Israel would awaken from its long exile from the presence of God and be restored as his people in the

Messiah, while others would reject the Messiah and doom themselves to separation from God and his people for eternity.

- Read Ezekiel 37:1-14
- How does that passage relate to the current one in Daniel?
- Why would God use the imagery of resurrection to describe Israel at the time of the Messiah?
- How do the events described in Ezekiel and Daniel foreshadow the resurrection of the righteous that we still wait for?

These prophecies are exciting for at least four specific reasons. The first is that they are a reminder that God is the only true God. Only the God of the Bible has given such incredible prophecies that have come true every single time. This shows him to be the one, true God.

Second is the incredible reminder that God fulfills his promises. We can take that to the bank. But that means that we must know God's promises for us and live according to them. Faith is, after all, living as though we genuinely believe in God's promises (cf. Rom. 4:21).

Third, this prophecy is a great reminder that God truly takes care of his people in Christ. In Christ we have every good thing that God wants to give us. God does not neglect or mistreat his people but has given us the very best in the life of Christ.

Finally, this prophecy offers us great hope. The resurrection that is available in the Messiah guarantees us the final resurrection that we will have in him as well.

- Read Ephesians 1:3-14
- What are the incredible gifts that God has given us in Christ?
- Read Romans 6:1-14
- What are the great promises concerning resurrection according to this passage?

Time to Ponder

- Read and meditate on Romans 4:21.
- Write out one way that this passage challenges or encourages you as read it today.
- Write down one conviction that you can either make or renew in your life based on this study.

‘Till The End - Day 55

Daniel 12:5-13

⁵ Then I, Daniel, looked, and there before me stood two others, one on this bank of the river and one on the opposite bank. ⁶ One of them said to the man clothed in linen, who was above the waters of the river, “How long will it be before these astonishing things are fulfilled?”

⁷ The man clothed in linen, who was above the waters of the river, lifted his right hand and his left hand toward heaven, and I heard him swear by him who lives forever, saying, “It will be for a time, times and half a time. ^[b] When the power of the holy people has been finally broken, all these things will be completed.”

⁸ I heard, but I did not understand. So I asked, “My lord, what will the outcome of all this be?”

⁹ He replied, “Go your way, Daniel, because the words are rolled up and sealed until the time of the end. ¹⁰ Many will be purified, made spotless and refined, but the wicked will continue to be wicked. None of the wicked will understand, but those who are wise will understand.

¹¹ “From the time that the daily sacrifice is abolished and the abomination that causes desolation is set up, there will be 1,290 days. ¹² Blessed is the one who waits for and reaches the end of the 1,335 days.

¹³ “As for you, go your way till the end. You will rest, and then at the end of the days you will rise to receive your allotted inheritance.”

When I was in high school we were constantly warned about something called the senior slump. That was the time in the final year of a student that parents feared and teachers knew all too well. It usually happened in the last semester of a student’s senior year when they became mentally fatigued from working through years of school. With the finish line in sight and graduation just weeks away, many students begin to realize that they will graduate no matter what, so they let up and try to coast to the end. Attendance can drop and grades plummet and those who fall prey to the senior slump limp into the finish line, only to realize that high school graduation is really just the beginning, not the end at all.

There are really three options when coming to the end of a long journey like that. You can keep working hard like you have been all along and finish well. You can pick up the pace and finish with absolute maximum effort. Or you can slack off and cruise in to the finish, basically wasting all of that time at the end when you are coasting.

- What is your typical reaction after you’ve been doing something for a long time? Do you get weary and slow down or do you persevere to the end? Be realistic, because it is important to truly know yourself?
- What, in general, are the advantages of persevering through difficult things?
- Read 1 Timothy 4:16
- What positive effects does persevering have according to this passage? What would the unstated negative effects be of not persevering?
- Read James 1:2-4
- How does this passage add to our understanding of perseverance?

Daniel had been given a peak into the time that was to come that would culminate with the coming of the Messiah. Hard times were ahead for those that truly desired to be faithful to God, but it would be well worth it when the Messiah came, although that would not be the end, but a new beginning.

Daniel was told to seal up the words of these prophecies, though, until the end. In the ancient world a contract would be copied for all of the parties but there would be one copy that was sealed with a special wax seal. If there was ever a dispute about the stipulations of the original contract, the sealed copy would be opened and everyone could see what the original agreement was. In telling Daniel to seal up the prophecy he wasn't saying that no one could read it until a later date. He was saying that the prophecies of Daniel should be held to and believed in but that the primary purpose of the book of Daniel would be once the Messiah came. People might have trouble discerning the prophecies before the Messiah came but once he did come, people would be able to look back to the book of Daniel and see the original prophecies and see clearly who the true Messiah was and that only he could be the fulfillment of these things.

But until then, Daniel should go his way till the end. He needed to continue to serve God and be faithful, knowing full well that he would not see the fulfillment of these things. That was not his lot. He would live out his days striving to be faithful to God and then die. But he could look forward to the time of final resurrection. He would rest with God as one who persevered and await the time of the age to come. But the message of the angel is clear. He should finish strong and keep his eyes focused on his inheritance. There was no time for slacking.

- Read Hebrews 10:36-39; James 1:12; James 5:7-11
- What important things do we learn about perseverance in these passages?

Time to Ponder

- Read and meditate on Hebrews 12:1-3
- Write out one way that this passage challenges or encourages you as read it today.
- Write down one conviction that you can either make or renew in your life based on this study.