

Truth for Today

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21st Century challenges from Daniel: God's plan of the ages – Daniel 2

I vividly remember the symbolic way the overthrow of Saddam Hussein was shown on television news in 2003. American troops, who had invaded Baghdad, pulled down the huge statue of him, leaving local Iraqi people to trample all over his fallen image in triumph and with much relief. Shortly afterwards, I referred to this incident in a talk about Daniel 2 I gave to the Ladies' Fellowship of my local church. I pointed out that Iraq is the very area where Nebuchadnezzar lived - Babylonia as it was known in those days - and that we're told in chapter 3 of a great image of gold he made for himself. I said that he got the idea from chapter 2 where he was told by Daniel that he was the head of gold of the glowing man-image of his dreams. I noticed that one woman was startled by the similarity between the self-exalting dictatorial activities of these ancient and modern Iraqi rulers. However, sheer amazement spread over her face as I went on to explain from chapter 2 how God has set out the course of world history and how He'll suddenly bring to nothing all world powers when Christ comes to reign. Yes, even though it may seem incredible, God has a plan for the ages and He made it known to the first major Gentile world ruler through a dream!

Let's remind ourselves of how the prophet Daniel revealed to Nebuchadnezzar the dream in Daniel 2:28-35: "[The] God in heaven ... has made known to King Nebuchadnezzar what will be in the latter days. Your dream and the visions of your head as you lay in bed are these: To you, O king ... came thoughts of what would be after this, and he who reveals mysteries made known to you what is to be. But as for me, this mystery has been revealed to me, not because of any wisdom that I have more than all the living, but in order that the interpretation may be made known to the king, and that you may know the thoughts of your mind. You saw, O king, and behold, a great image ... mighty and of exceeding brightness, stood before you, and its appearance was frightening. The head ... was of fine gold, its chest and arms of silver, its middle and thighs of bronze, its legs of iron, its feet partly of iron and partly of clay. As you looked, a stone was cut out by no human hand, and it struck the image on its feet of iron and clay, and broke them in pieces. Then the iron, the clay, the bronze, the silver, and the gold, all together were broken in pieces, and became like the chaff of the summer threshing floors; and the wind carried them away, so that not a trace of them could be found. But the stone that struck the image became a great mountain and filled the whole earth" (English Standard Version).

We must ask: "Who is this 'stone cut out by no human hand', who is great enough to conquer the entire world?" It's the Lord Jesus Christ, who in 1 Peter 2:4-8 is the elect and precious Living Stone. By no human hand must mean that it's by divine action, as stated by Daniel when he interprets Nebuchadnezzar's dream and emphasises that this is God's action: "in the days of those kings **the God of heaven** will set up a kingdom that shall never be destroyed; nor shall the kingdom be left to another people. It shall break in pieces all these kingdoms and bring them to an end, and it shall stand forever, just as you saw that a stone was cut from a mountain by no human hand, and that it broke in pieces the iron, the bronze, the clay, the silver, and the gold. [The] great God has made known to the king what shall be after this. The dream is certain, and its interpretation is sure", 2:44-45.

Yes, Jesus Christ is coming to reign over the entire world! Christians may be wondering if we are approaching the time of the kingdom reign of their Lord, whilst mankind is asking, "Where will it all end?" From this prophetic outline of the course of world-dominating powers, we can confidently say that the proposed solutions, to present troubles between nations and to current concerns about our planet, certainly will not bring about the long-desired world-wide conditions of lasting peace and security that were the hype during year 2000, the start of the new millennium. Neither will the United Nations nor western powers nor eastern powers nor any other human intervention. No! But God will – exclusively, dramatically and finally through the Lord Jesus Christ, the stone cut out of the mountain by no human hand!!

We know from reading Old Testament prophecies that Messiah's kingdom will be centred on the land of Israel, with Jerusalem established as the capital of the world. In Daniel's lifetime this hope seemed utterly lost when God caused the Babylonians to deport the Jews because of their unfaithfulness to Him, and because of the profanity of Judah's last king, Zedekiah. During his reign, God gave them a most remarkable promise. Addressing Zedekiah personally through Ezekiel the prophet, He said: "And [you], profane, wicked prince of Israel, whose day is come, at the time of the iniquity of the end, - thus [says] the Lord Jehovah: Remove the mitre and take off the crown; what is shall be no more. Exalt that which is low, and abase that which is high. I will overturn, overturn, overturn it! This also shall be no more, until he come whose right it is; and I will give it to him", Ezekiel 21:25-27 (JN Darby translation). After the

deportation of the Jews following the siege of Jerusalem in 606 BC, God revealed His plan for the ages through Nebuchadnezzar's dream, interpreted by Daniel the prophet, one of the royal captives taken to Babylon. In this plan, God showed how He would keep changing the government of the civilised world by overturning successive Gentile world empires from that time until to the Messiah reigns.

Let's now look at Daniel's interpretation of Nebuchadnezzar's dream in the following way:

- the course of God's plan for the ages
- the character of the world powers described in the interpretation
- the consummation of God's plan for the ages
- the continuance of the everlasting kingdom of the Messiah.

The course of God's plan for the ages

We see that Gentile world-dominance commenced with Nebuchadnezzar from Daniel's explanation in 2:37-38: "You, O king, the king of kings, to whom the God of heaven has given the kingdom, the power, and the might, and the glory, and into whose hand he has given, wherever they dwell, the children of man, the beasts of the field, and the birds of the heavens, making you rule over them all - you are the head of gold". History tells us that the Babylonian empire started in 605 BC.

Daniel then told Nebuchadnezzar that three successive kingdoms would come after him. Their chronology is from the head to the toes of the image. Again, from history we can identify them as:

1. The Medo-Persian empire from 539 – 333 BC, represented by the silver chest and arms of the image, and which conquered the Babylonian empire.
2. The Grecian empire, which came to world power in 333 BC. This empire, portrayed in the image by its brass (or copper) belly and thighs, quickly dominated the world under Alexander the Great.
3. The Roman Empire, symbolised by the iron legs of the image, which gained world supremacy during the third century BC, although it didn't formally split into two parts, the Eastern (or Byzantine) and the Western Empires, until AD 395.

In verses 41-45, the Roman Empire is seen:

- first to change form from iron legs into an iron/clay mixture for its feet and toes
- then to continue until the intervention of Christ to establish His everlasting kingdom.

We now know from history that the Roman Empire broke up during the sixth century AD. From that time it has lain dormant until its revival as the feet and toes of the image, which is still future. Its re-emergence from the sea of nations is of great interest to students of Bible prophecy.

The character of these four world powers

These kingdoms are described by the contrasting properties of the metals used in the image. The metals decrease in value and density: gold – silver – copper – iron. By contrast they increase in strength: from soft and pliable gold, through to the tensile strength of iron. These facts bring out some of the salient features of these civilised world empires. In verses 37-38, Nebuchadnezzar is told he is the head of gold, a king of kings over a realm where there was no parliament, no courts and no electorate. This doesn't mean that God approves of imperial dictators per se. Rather, God's requirements that one Man should rule the world with absolute and unlimited power are seen in the essential autocratic nature of Nebuchadnezzar's government. In this respect, the Lord Jesus Christ is the King of kings (King with a capital K). When He comes, He'll rule in righteous equity and with benevolent perfection. Sadly, Nebuchadnezzar overstepped his God-given authority "and because of the greatness that [God] gave him, all peoples, nations, and languages trembled and feared before him. Whom he would, he killed, and whom he would, he kept alive; whom he would, he raised up, and whom he would, he humbled", Daniel 5:19.

When the Babylonian empire fell from its proud pre-eminence under Belshazzar and his father, it was replaced by the Medo-Persian Empire. In it, the emperor wasn't absolute but answered to the law, 6:14-15. Silver is of less value than gold and this fact reflects the inferior quality, according to God's specification, of rule by this dual-headed empire. Likewise, the Grecian and the Roman empires, represented in the copper and iron parts of the image respectively, were further away again from absolute autocratic rule. Finally, the future revived Roman Empire, shown by the iron/clay admixture of the feet and toes, is the worst of type of government. Non-metallic clay symbolizes what is human rather than divine, see Job 10:9 and 33:6. On this point, we should note that the Romans introduced citizens' rights, which form the basis of democratic principles. Democracy is the utopia according to modern-day political

thinking. It may shock some listeners to realise that this is entirely opposite to what God will introduce for and throughout Christ's reign!

By comparing the relative strengths of gold, silver, copper and iron, we can see the ways in which these empires are said by God to have used the governmental powers He gave them. Rome was the most powerful of the empires, ruling with the strength of iron. It was notorious for the excessive application of military might in commanding allegiance to the Caesars. In this respect, it's both frightening and alarming to see the characteristic of future world government described as iron married with soft clay. We're constantly being told that we can solve world problems by human ingenuity and human resources without any need for recourse to God for help! Sadly, democracy as exists in today's world will then be supplemented with brutal, police-like rule, such as we have known to exist in modern times in some eastern bloc states. However, that whole of government will be brittle, or fragile, due to lack of cohesion between democracy and dictatorship.

Finally, we must also note that this revived Roman Empire is so very different from all others preceding it, yet it's an embodiment of them all. It has ten toes, i.e., ten main kingdoms, although we must look at other scriptures to find out more details such as their relative authority compared to that of the empire's president, see 7:24 and Revelation 13 and 17. It's strong and brutal, verse 40, yet divided and weak, verse 41, and brittle, verse 43. These contrasting characteristics are seen more clearly in chapter 7, where the moral features of the four empires are described as four great beasts which came up out of the sea, i.e., out of the Gentile nations. The first was like a lion and had eagles' wings; the second like a bear raised up on one side with three ribs in its mouth between its teeth; the third like a leopard, with four wings of a bird on its back and with four heads; the fourth was rather a monster, which couldn't be likened to any known animal at all. It was "terrifying and dreadful and exceedingly strong. It had great iron teeth; it devoured and broke in pieces and stamped what was left with its feet. It was different from all the beasts that were before it, and it had ten horns ... [and] exceedingly terrifying, with its teeth of iron and claws of bronze, and which devoured and broke in pieces and stamped what was left [of the former beasts] ... [and] which shall be different from all the kingdoms, and it shall devour the whole earth, and trample it down, and break it to pieces", 7:7, 19 and 23.

The consummation of God's plan for the ages

God's plan for these empires reaches a conclusion when the 'stone cut out by no human hand' smashes into the feet of the image and sweeps away, as chaff, all these kingdoms. That stone then becomes a great mountain, which fills the whole earth. Verse 28 states that this will occur "in the latter days"; whilst verses 44-45 show that these times are still future to us and that they'll be during the time of the revived Roman Empire. The question is: when will this be? Most contemporary prophetic commentators are now convinced that it'll be in the near future. Already the renewal of a Roman empire can be seen in the efforts to unite Europe:

- In September 1946, Sir Winston Churchill at Zurich famously prescribed a remedy for the devastation left by the Second World War. It was "to recreate the European family ... we must build a kind of United States of Europe!"
- By 1969, at the founding of the European Physical Society, it was stated that the integration of Europe had become an "inescapable historical necessity".
- A 1991 scientific journal article graphically represented "Stages on the way to the United States of Europe" with an exponentially increasing timeline. It has several date points:
 - European Iron and Steel Community: Euratom, 1952
 - Treaty of Rome, 1957
 - Single European Market Act, 1992; followed rapidly by other milestones:
 - European Monetary Union
 - European Union
 - United States of Europe (USE)

Whilst the political will of the EU for an USE may be ever increasing, God is still in control. As Christians, we "know that the Most High rules the kingdom of men and gives it to whom He will", 4:32. We must fix our hope on the return of the Lord Jesus Christ in great power and great glory in the assurance that "the great God has made known ... what shall be after [our times] for [Nebuchadnezzar's] dream is certain, and its interpretation sure", Daniel 2:45. Confidently we assert: "[God's] purpose [is] set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in Him, things in heaven and things on earth", Ephesians 1:9-10.

The continuance of the everlasting kingdom of the Messiah

It's at the end of those coming times that God's plan for the ages is realised. As we've seen from Daniel 2, it will happen when the God of heaven breaks in pieces all these kingdoms by His own means. Although they've continued to exist since their inception, and may even reappear in some form or other, they're all smashed to smithereens by the stone cut out by no human hand and disappear completely! Then God sets up the kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ. Not only does Christ become a great power, verse 35, but His kingdom shall never be destroyed, it shall stand forever, verse 44. This important truth is repeated throughout the book of Daniel using almost the same words as 2:44:

- Darius the Mede said: "His kingdom shall never be destroyed, and His dominion shall be to the end", 6:26.
- In the visions of the four beasts, the Ancient of Days gives to the Son of Man "dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve Him; His dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and His kingdom one that shall not be destroyed", 7:14. In verse 27, the same Ancient of Days grants the same "kingdom...to the people of the saints of the Most High; their kingdom shall be an everlasting kingdom, and all dominions shall serve and obey them".

The phrases 'an everlasting dominion', 'one that shall not be destroyed', and 'one that shall not pass away' verify that God's purposes for this world are climaxed in the millennial reign of the Lord Jesus Christ, when "the kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ, and He shall reign forever and ever", Revelation 20:4 and 11:15. So we confidently sing:

*So be it, Lord, Thy throne shall never,
Like earth's proud empires, pass away;
Thy Kingdom stands and grows for ever,
Till all Thy creatures own Thy sway.*

The eternal character of Christ's kingdom means that:

- it will never be superseded
- it will never pass to another man
- its glory and power endure throughout all time
- it goes on for ever.

But time will cease when the first heavens and the first earth pass away. "Then comes the end, when He delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. For He must reign until He has put all his enemies under His feet...When all things are subjected to Him, then the Son Himself will also be subjected to Him who put all things in subjection under Him, that God may be all in all", 1 Corinthians 15:24-28.

*"At length, the final kingdom
No bound, no end possessing,
When heaven and earth
God all in all
Shall fill with largest blessing:*

*All root of evil banished;
No breath of sin to wither;
On earth, on high,
Nought else but joy
And blissful peace for ever."*

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