

War of the Gods

Messages from the Book of Daniel

Message 1

The Field of Battle

Daniel 1:1-7

The First Attack

I have just received horrible news. At exactly 7:15 this evening Iranian terrorists detonated an atomic bomb in Chicago. Most of the downtown is obliterated and hundreds of thousands of people have died. At 7:30 the president of Iran broadcast a message to America. He claims that he will blow up one of our cities every three hours unless we agree to his demands. We must evacuate all western troops from the Mid-East and Asia. We must cease our support of Israel. We must give Iran our latest weapons. And we must teach Islam in our schools. Los Angeles will be next at 10:15, followed by Dallas at 1:15. If these demands are not met, New York will blow at noon tomorrow. Mr. Ahmadinejad claims that bombs are already in place and timed to explode unless we meet his demands.

What would it be like to find yourself suddenly in the grip of a madman? Scenarios like this are the stuff of adventure movies, but to us it is all fiction. What if it were real? What was it like to wake up 65 years ago and discover that your entire Pacific fleet had been destroyed in one attack by Japanese bombers? What was it like to hear the scream of air raid sirens, the roar of planes overhead, and the crash of explosions as London burned around you? Although the United States has participated in numerous conflicts in the past half-century, none have had the deep, personal impact of World War II. Even then the fighting was elsewhere. None of us here have woken up one morning to realize that your world is massively changed forever. None of us have watched a foreign power occupy our cities. None of us has been deported to a foreign country, never to see home and family again.

Although Judah had seen her share of wars and foreign aggression over the years, she had never been completely defeated. The most dangerous situation was the invasion by the Assyrian king Sennacherib during the reign of king Hezekiah. Sennacherib took most of Judah's large cities, but he never penetrated Jerusalem. Everyone knew why. Jerusalem was where the temple of God was located. God had promised to reside there forever, and one day to raise up a great savior in Judah. So although Judah had her ups and downs, she was secure from destruction because of God's promise. God's temple was particularly secure, because God Himself guarded His earthly palace. If anyone tried to enter God's house unauthorized, he would be struck dead. Until Nebuchadnezzar.

Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, forced the king of Judah to submit to his rule. This was humiliating enough, but he didn't stop there. He was determined to subjugate completely the Jewish people. So there came a day when Daniel and hundreds of other teenage boys, all sons of nobility, heard a knock on their doors. They were arrested on the spot and hauled off to the Babylonian camp for deportation to Babylon. The king of Judah was helpless to prevent Nebuchadnezzar from doing whatever he wanted in Jerusalem. And finally, in a brazen move that totally demoralized the Jewish people, he robbed the temple of God. Nebuchadnezzar was convinced that the puny God of the Jews was no match for his power and his god, and he proved it by plundering Jerusalem and the temple there. The war had begun!

Prelude to War

No one believed it could happen. All the residents of Jerusalem were convinced that the city and temple could never be dominated by gentiles. There were the promises of God. God had promised Abraham to give his descendants the land of Canaan forever and make them a blessing to the whole earth. In Moses' day God had made a covenant with Israel. Surely He would not abandon them! God promised David that his

seed would rule in Jerusalem forever, and used Solomon to build the temple for His palace. The prophets predicted a Messiah who would come to usher in an age of bliss and rule in Jerusalem. So no matter how low her fortunes sunk, everyone was convinced that Judah would never fall to a foreign power. So how did it happen? What went wrong? How did Nebuchadnezzar defeat the God of creation? Was God not the supreme being He claimed to be?

The key verse in this chapter is verse two. “And the Lord gave Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand, with some of the vessels of the house of God.” Nebuchadnezzar’s incredible victory was due not only to his own power – it was God’s decision to give His people to this pagan king. The Jews were astonished and devastated, but that was only because they did not know their Bible as well as they thought. All they knew about God’s promises and prophecies was true, but they conveniently forgot other of God’s commands.

Judah in Daniel’s day was an evil place. For hundreds of years God had been sending prophets to call His people away from their sins, but they not only refused, each generation pursued sin with more enthusiasm than the last. Listen to the prophet Isaiah as he calls to the people of Israel to turn from their sin and follow the Lord.

Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth; for the LORD has spoken:
“Children have I reared and brought up, but they have rebelled against me.
The ox knows its owner, and the donkey its master's crib,
but Israel does not know, my people do not understand.”
Ah, sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity,
offspring of evildoers, children who deal corruptly!
They have forsaken the LORD,
they have despised the Holy One of Israel, they are utterly estranged.
Isaiah 1:2-4

Israel was so enamored of their special place in God’s eyes, they forgot the purpose for which God had called them. From the beginning, God intended that His people should imitate Him in righteous living. Listen to what God said about Abraham’s descendants.

“For I have chosen [Abraham], that he may command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing righteousness and justice, so that the LORD may bring to Abraham what he has promised him.” (Genesis 18:19)

When God called Moses to rescue the Israelites from Egypt, He gave Moses a law so the people would know exactly *how* to do righteousness and justice. The Ten Commandments are the short version of this law, and it is summarized by the command to live holy (pure) lives.

“I am the LORD who brought you up out of the land of Egypt to be your God. You shall therefore be holy, for I am holy.” (Leviticus 11:45)

God was a father to the Israelites. He called them His first-born son. How could they be His children if they did not exhibit His character? How could a holy God have wicked children? Later Moses warned the Israelites that God would punish them if they did not obey His law.

Know therefore that the LORD your God is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments, to a thousand generations, and repays to their face those who hate him, by destroying them. He will not be slack with one who hates him.

He will repay him to his face. (Deuteronomy 7:9-10)

But by Isaiah's time the Israelites had long experience in ignoring God's law. Generation after generation they had worshiped other gods and treated each other cruelly. They ignored God's commands, but still expected His blessings. Listen as Isaiah continues to upbraid them for their wickedness.

How the faithful city has become a whore, she who was full of justice!
Righteousness lodged in her, but now murderers.
Your silver has become dross, your best wine mixed with water.
Your princes are rebels and companions of thieves.
Everyone loves a bribe and runs after gifts.
They do not bring justice to the fatherless,
and the widow's cause does not come to them.

Isaiah 1:21-23

The LORD will enter into judgment with the elders and princes of his people:
"It is you who have devoured the vineyard, the spoil of the poor is in your houses.
What do you mean by crushing my people,
by grinding the face of the poor?" declares the Lord GOD of hosts.
The LORD said: Because the daughters of Zion are haughty and walk with outstretched necks,
glancing wantonly with their eyes, mincing along as they go, tinkling with their feet,
therefore the Lord will strike with a scab the heads of the daughters of Zion,
and the LORD will lay bare their secret parts.

Isaiah 3:14-17

Woe to those who call evil good and good evil,
who put darkness for light and light for darkness,
who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter!
Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes, and shrewd in their own sight!
Woe to those who are heroes at drinking wine, and valiant men in mixing strong drink,
who acquit the guilty for a bribe, and deprive the innocent of his right!
Therefore, as the tongue of fire devours the stubble, and as dry grass sinks down in the flame,
so their root will be as rottenness, and their blossom go up like dust;
for they have rejected the law of the LORD of hosts,
and have despised the word of the Holy One of Israel.

Isaiah 5:20-24

Then Isaiah foresaw God's reaction to the persistent sin of Judah.

Therefore the anger of the LORD was kindled against his people,
and he stretched out his hand against them and struck them, and the mountains quaked;
and their corpses were as refuse in the midst of the streets.
For all this his anger has not turned away, and his hand is stretched out still.
He will raise a signal for nations afar off, and whistle for them from the ends of the earth;
and behold, quickly, speedily they come!
None is weary, none stumbles, none slumbers or sleeps,
not a waistband is loose, not a sandal strap broken;
their arrows are sharp, all their bows bent,
their horses' hoofs seem like flint, and their wheels like the whirlwind.
Their roaring is like a lion, like young lions they roar;

they growl and seize their prey; they carry it off, and none can rescue.
They will growl over it on that day, like the growling of the sea.
And if one looks to the land, behold, darkness and distress;
and the light is darkened by its clouds.

Isaiah 5:25-30

In 722 B.C. God sent the Assyrian army against the northern tribes of Israel. The devastation was horrifying. Most of the population was carried off into other lands and never heard of again. Judah shuddered at this disaster, but she passed this off as judgment for the grosser sins of her northern neighbor. And besides – she had the temple. God would never allow His own temple to be conquered. Yahweh was God of all the earth. He was invincible. No mere human army could defeat Him!

Judah made a terrible, terrible mistake. She thought that God was limiting Himself to the people in the land of Judah and the building that Solomon built. It is true that for a time God revealed Himself in a special way in the land of Canaan and in the temple there. But the God of the universe cannot be limited to one place or one race of people. Isaiah concluded his prophecy saying...

“Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool;
what is the house that you would build for me, and what is the place of my rest?
All these things my hand has made, and so all these things came to be, declares the LORD.
But this is the one to whom I will look:
he who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word.”

Isaiah 66:1-2

Sadly, Judah was far from humble and contrite – and she was intentionally ignoring God’s word. The nation of Judah had ceased to be God’s people. It was only a matter of time until reality caught up with them.

Under Hezekiah’s rule in the 8th century B.C. Judah narrowly escaped destruction at the hands of the terrible Assyrians. Hezekiah feared God and was a godly king. His son Manasseh, however, was unspeakably wicked. He not only permitted idol worship, he even promoted it. Manasseh was a violent man who was willing to kill to accomplish his goals. Manasseh’s son was as evil as his father, but he was assassinated after a two-year reign. Josiah followed him. Josiah was a good king who tried to reform the nation, but the damage was irreversible. Josiah made the politically foolish mistake of getting tangled up in a dispute between Assyria and Egypt, and died in the battle of Carchemish in 605 B.C. Egypt defeated Assyria in that battle and immediately took control of Judah. Josiah’s son Jehoahaz was placed on the throne, but Pharaoh Neco imprisoned him in Egypt and placed Jehoiakim on the throne of Judah. Three years later Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, defeated Pharaoh and received control of all lands north of the Brook of Egypt. Judah was completely in his grip.

Where is God?

The inconceivable had happened. Jerusalem had fallen. Now she was a mere vassal state of the Babylonian Empire. Her best and brightest, the young men who might one day have led a revolt and re-established the Jewish state were in captivity. And worst of all, her temple had been plundered, and the holy vessels were now in the filthy pagan temple in Babylon. All Jerusalem was asking, “What had gone wrong? Where was God? Why didn’t He protect His people?” Because the nation of Judah was no longer God’s people.

The prophet Hosea showed that God would reject His people if they rejected Him. Judah had been rejecting God for centuries. For centuries God had been warning Judah to repent, but she refused. Now the

prophecies have come true. Judah will be destroyed for her wickedness. But that does not mean that God has no people in the earth to call His own. As Isaiah said, God's people are not those who live in Judah, they are those who are humble and righteous – wherever they are. When Judah was destroyed, the faithful were scattered all over the world. Wherever they were found, they were God's people.

Furthermore, God appointed new rulers. Isaiah prophesied that God would appoint a man named Cyrus to rule His people. “[God] says of Cyrus, ‘He is my shepherd, and he shall fulfill all my purpose’”. (Isaiah 44:28) We shall meet this Cyrus again in the book of Daniel. Even more surprising is the people God chose to destroy Judah. Listen to the prophet Habakkuk as he recounts in astonishment the vision of God's discipline on Judah.

Look among the nations, and see; wonder and be astounded.
For I am doing a work in your days that you would not believe if told.
For behold, I am raising up the Chaldeans, that bitter and hasty nation,
who march through the breadth of the earth, to seize dwellings not their own.
They are dreaded and fearsome; their justice and dignity go forth from themselves.
Their horses are swifter than leopards, more fierce than the evening wolves;
their horsemen press proudly on.
Their horsemen come from afar; they fly like an eagle swift to devour.
They all come for violence, all their faces forward.
They gather captives like sand.
At kings they scoff, and at rulers they laugh.
They laugh at every fortress, for they pile up earth and take it.
Then they sweep by like the wind and go on,
guilty men, whose own might is their god!
Habakkuk 1:5-11

The Chaldeans were one of the main ethnic groups in the Babylonian Empire. Notice how they are described – bitter and hasty, dreaded and fearsome, faster than leopards, fiercer than wolves, a law unto themselves, violent and invincible. And this is God's choice? Habakkuk could not believe it. How could he? If Judah was wicked, these people were ten times worse! Perhaps we might accept that they would accidentally gain enough power to defeat God's people, but how can we believe that they are God's choice to execute vengeance on His own nation of Judah?

Nebuchadnezzar rose swiftly to power in Babylon. As we shall see, he personified the characteristics of the Babylonian Empire. Swift, ruthless, and cruel, he crushed everything in his path. Egypt fell, and then Judah. When Judah refused to stay down, he returned – several times, until he ground the city to dust and carried off everyone but the old and sick. Nebuchadnezzar was master of the whole Mid-East. But what appeared to be the end of the battle was really just the beginning. God's patience with wickedness was over, and He was about to exercise His power over the whole world. The God who said, “Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool,” will not sit idly by while violent men pursue selfish ends. Before long Nebuchadnezzar would realize that although he held God's vessels, God held him. God has carried the war against evil into Babylon, and from there He will direct the course of history.

The Battle Today

What does this ancient story have to do with us today? Two lessons. First, fear God. God is holy, and His people must be holy. If you dabble in sin, you will regret it. Do not think that God's love is like human love. Human love is self-centered and indulgent. You will overlook the sins of those you love. But God's love never overlooks sin. God's love destroys sin. But God is patient. Paul said, “Do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead

you to repentance?" (Romans 2:4) Are you like the ancient Jews, trusting in God's love, but harboring sin in your heart? Repent! Repent before God tears sin out of your life with violence.

The second lesson is that God rules the earth. The capture of Daniel and the temple vessels was not so much Nebuchadnezzar's victory as God's plan. God is always working out His plan, toward that final goal that everyone on earth will bow and worship Jesus Christ. Just as Daniel could not have expected to be carried into captivity, neither can you know what will happen to you. Who could have expected Adolf Hitler to rise to power in Germany and plunge the world into war? Even now, who can say exactly *how* this contributed to God's plan. But the lesson for you is that the course of your life is not some accident. Even your own decisions are not random events, but somehow God weaves everything into His plan to save His people and bring glory to Christ. Perhaps someday you will wake up and find that your country is occupied by a foreign power. Perhaps you will be captured and carried off to some distant land and never see you family and friends again. None of us can predict the future. What we are sure of is that God is in control, and He does all things for the love of His people and for His glory.

This semester we will see how God accomplished His universal purpose 26 centuries ago through this man Daniel. It is an exciting story of the rise and fall of empires, war between angels and demons, and at the center is Daniel – the teenage boy who was carried captive to Babylon. We will also learn how you are just as much at the center of things as Daniel was, and you also have a role to play in the destiny of nations. But first you must be on God's side. If you are here tonight and have never committed yourself to serving God, this is your first step. Or if you have been straying from God, now is the time to return to Jesus. Do not stay on the losing side of history. Turn away from your sin and join God's people!

C. David Green
Lehigh University
January 17, 2006