

WHEN DREAMS COME TRUE

by Ray C. Stedman

I am encouraged to undertake a study in prophetic matters by the increasing realization that these are peculiarly times in which the prophetic word needs to be declared. I am struck by Peter's characterization of prophecy as "a more sure word ... which shines as a light in a dark place," {cf, 2 Pet 1:19}. Surely 1968 has brought a noticeable darkening of our world. I am joined in that opinion by others, not only by religious men but secular writers as well. The British novelist, C. P. Snow, said that he felt he has never come so close to despair in his life as he did in 1968. The things which he felt in 1967 were all present and visible in 1968.

I wonder if there are any of us who have any real idea of how despairing many are today. Do we have any concept at all of how hopeless life appears to many young people in our day? They are thwarted on every side and do not know where to turn. They find no sense or meaning to life. These are not merely passing fancies, they are conditions under which some live all the time, without a ray of hope. I feel strongly that we need to lift up our voices on prophetic matters because they are designed to be light to shine in a dark place.

A number of men were discussing the despair and hopelessness of our age recently and among them was Dr. Gerhard Dirks, the inventor of the memory systems for the great computers. He offered a very helpful analysis of the reason why so many young people are living in despair. There are, he said, three instruments which have been used to bring about widespread despair: television, the computer, and the nuclear bomb.

Television, with its remarkable ability to bring to us the sufferings, heartaches, sorrows, and problems of an entire world has made a great difference to our present generation. We are all confronted daily with difficulties and problems occurring all over the earth, which come flooding into our living rooms. Though we may not pay much attention to such news reports, there is a subliminal concern, fear and anxiety that results from this. Further, we are not content, apparently, with actual problems, but we plunge ourselves into fantasy problems which come in serial form: what can explain the popularity of Peyton Place to so many if not that they are involved in others' contrived problems? It is thus we find ourselves unexplainably possessed by a sense of utter frustration. Where can you begin to solve problems of this magnitude?

The computer has added to all this by making possible the registering and filing of facts about everyone, but on a most impersonal basis. It majors in numbers and has tagged us with a series of numbers indispensable to life, and, as a result, we all feel de-personalized. The only way anyone can make an impression now is to bend his IBM card. Youth feels this namelessness particularly. It is one of the reasons why they are so restless and disturbed.

The third instrument that contributes to world despair is the nuclear bomb, with its frightening threat of genocide on a worldwide basis; its ability to wipe out cities, whole nations, even entire races, in one awful atomic holocaust. These three factors together contrive to produce a terrible sense of despair, frustration and meaninglessness to life.

But the Scriptures set forth what is called, in Paul's letter to the Ephesians, "the helmet of salvation" {Eph 6:17}, salvation there not in the sense of regeneration but of deliverance from a coming catastrophe, a way out. A helmet, of course, is designed to protect the mind. One of the reasons we are facing such mindless despair today, such deterioration of the thinking and intelligence of men -- and our mental hospitals are crammed to the full so that we cannot build them fast enough -- is because the human mind is exposed to the disembodied frustration and fear of our day. We need then the helmet of the hope of salvation, and that is exactly what the prophetic word is -- the word of reassurance that God is in control of human affairs.

The book of Daniel begins with Daniel as a young captive in Babylon. The time of the book follows the captivity of Israel when, in 583 B.C., the city of Jerusalem was destroyed and Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, took the Israelites to live in the city of Babylon and the provinces of the Babylonian empire. Daniel

was one of these captives, a young man of royal blood who, as a teenager, was taken away from Jerusalem. The book ends with him as an old man, but an honored and respected leader, having served under several kings of both the Babylonian and Medio-Persian empires.

The book is partly made up of certain personal incidents which Daniel and his friends experienced but upon which we will not comment in this series. They are, however, extremely helpful incidents, especially for young people today. I heartily recommend the book of Daniel as the best book of the Old Testament for young people, for its theme is: How to live a godly life in a pagan world. There are many wonderfully helpful incidents recounted. They show how to face the pressures that a young person experiences in the midst of a godless environment. But we shall begin with Chapter 2, the remarkable dream of Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon.

I shall not dwell much on the nature of the dream itself though it was somewhat of a nightmare. The king saw a great image, a colossus, a statue of a man divided into four sections: a head of gold, chest and arms of silver, belly and thighs of brass, and legs of iron with its feet of mingled iron and clay. Naturally he was puzzled by this and did not know what to make of this strange dream. He called in his wise men, enchanters, magicians and astrologers, to discover the interpretation of the dream.

The empire of Nebuchadnezzar has long ago crumbled into dust. Even the great capital of Babylon is today an uninhabited desolation of ruins covered by the dust of centuries. But the dream that this king dreamed is still being fulfilled in our day, and it is this that makes it so significant to us. We have not yet reached the end of Nebuchadnezzar's dream and its meaning.

The wording of the King James Version suggests that the king forgot his dream in the morning and demanded that his wise men make known to him the substance of the dream as well as its interpretation. But the RSV is quite right in changing the phrase of Verse 5 from "the thing is gone from me" to the more accurate "the word from me is sure." The king did not forget his dream at all. He remembered it well, but he is testing his counselors and he was a wise king to do so. He well knew that these men would concoct an allegedly supernatural interpretation of whatever it was he told them, and he would be helpless to challenge their meaning. Of course, they could use this as a clever gimmick to obtain whatever they wanted from the king. No wonder he was suspicious of these men for he knew they operated on the basic philosophy, "You tell me your dream, and I'll tell you mine." So he tested them by this strange demand on his part. That explains what some have felt to be an extremely cruel demand on the part of this king. Of course, the counselors rebelled at that, as well they might, for they realized they were on the verge of exposure. If they were truly able, by supernatural power, to interpret dreams then it would have made no difference to them to tell the original dream and its interpretation, or the interpretation alone. But the king has hit upon a very fine device to expose their duplicity.

There are many today who think that this kind of thing belongs to the dark ages of primitive superstition. But it is amazing how many still believe in astrologers, soothsayers, enchanters, etc. When I was at the Congress on Prophecy in Dallas recently I was interviewed on one of those radio talk programs where people could call in and ask questions. The interviewer said to me, "What do you think of Jeane Dixon?" Then he added, rather significantly, I thought, "Miss Dixon was here as our guest not long ago and she said some very amazing things about the future."

He said this so meaningfully that I realized I had to tread carefully. I said to him (and this was on the air), "Well, I am not in a position to judge Miss Dixon personally, but one thing I do know: she admits that she sometimes misses in her prognostications. She has been wrong on occasion but many people seem to be impressed when she bats .500. The impressive thing to me, however, is that the Word of God is always 100 percent right. Its batting average is 1.000; it hits it on the nose every time." We do need to be aware of those who, in strange ways, seem able to predict the future, and oftentimes they are right.

But Daniel is perfectly right when he says to this pagan king,

"No wise men, enchanters, magicians, or astrologers can show to the king the mystery which the king has asked, but there is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries, and he has made known to King Nebuchadnezzar what will be in the latter days." {Dan 2:27b-28a

RSV}

In that passage Daniel uses a phrase which is really the key to this dream and even to the book itself. It is the phrase, "in the latter days." Daniel indicates that what has been shown to the king is a vision of the future. He says very plainly in Verse 29:

"To you, O king as you lay in bed came thoughts of what would be hereafter, and he who reveals mysteries made known to you what is to be." {Dan 2:29 RSV}

This is a vision of the future. It clearly predicts events that would come to pass in the near future and in the far distant future as well.

This predictive element is why the book of Daniel has been under attack by liberal scholars. Liberals, by and large, reject any evidence of the supernatural. That is why they attack the Virgin birth, and why they attack the resurrection of Jesus. They deny that these things can occur, and the only proof they advance is simply to deny them. They base their arguments upon a preconceived position in which they simply assume that nothing supernatural can occur. But, of late, there has come increasingly important evidence to substantiate the fact that Daniel was not written at a late date, as the liberals tell us. Their explanation of these predictive passages in Daniel is that the book was not written about 600 B.C., as conservatives claim, but rather, it was written two centuries after the events had already occurred, and is really only history cast in the form of prediction.

But this late-dating of Daniel has been challenged by some very impressive evidence, not least of which is a fragment of Daniel found among the Dead Sea Scrolls. All scholars agree that the Dead Sea Scrolls date from the second century before Christ, about the time when the liberal scholars claim the book was written. But, of course, if it were already a part of the Scriptures, held sacred by the group which wrote the Dead Sea Scrolls, then it could not have been written at that time. It was not contemporary literature; for it was already known and respected, and had formed a part of the body of Scripture long before their day.

The phrase, "the latter times," concerns itself with a particular area of the future; a future called elsewhere in this book, "the end times," or, "the time of the end." The phrase, "the latter times," is used in a number of other places in the Old Testament. One striking instance of it occurs in the very next book to Daniel in the Bible, the prophecy of Hosea. In a striking passage in the third chapter of Hosea, the prophet gathers up the whole of the history of Israel after their captivity in Babylon. He says, in Verse 4,

"For the children of Israel shall dwell many days without king or prince, without sacrifice or pillar, without ephod or teraphim." {Hos 3:4 RSV}

This reference to Israelites living without a sacrifice places the fulfillment of this after the time of our Lord, for, in New Testament times they were still sacrificing in the temple. But here is a prediction that there would come a time when Israel would abide without sacrifice. As most of you know already, from the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. until this present hour, through 1900 and more years of history, the Jews have never had a blood sacrifice. The prediction continues:

"For the children of Israel shall dwell many days without king or prince, without sacrifice or pillar, without ephod or teraphim. Afterward the children of Israel shall turn and seek the Lord their God, and David their king; and they shall come in fear to the Lord and to his goodness in the latter days." {Hos 3:4-5 RSV}

There is the same phrase that Daniel uses. It confirms the king's dream as a prophecy that concerns itself with the end of times and, specifically, with the end of the times of the Gentiles.

This prediction takes on increased significance to us in view of our Lord's words about Jerusalem when, 40 years before the city was destroyed by the Romans, he uttered these remarkable words,

"Jerusalem shall be trodden down of the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles be fulfilled." {Luke 21:24 KJV}

Jerusalem was to be in the hands of Gentile overlords, and the Jews would never possess the city again until the times of the Gentiles should be fulfilled. A most remarkable thing has taken place in our own day. On June 6, 1967, the Jews recaptured Jerusalem. It is a most moving thing to visit that ancient city and see Jews thronging the streets of the Old City once again. Orthodox Jews, with their long curly sideburns and their strange hats and garments stand around looking longingly into the temple courts from which they are still excluded because it is such a holy enclosure. Each Sabbath they gather at the Wailing Wall in great numbers, running through the streets of the city in order that they might be present at the beginning of the service to remember Jerusalem's glory, and wail over her present desolation. This most remarkable event would indicate, in the light of our Lord's words, that we have reached the last of the times of the Gentiles.

I must point out to you that the word, "times," in that expression, is an inaccurate one. There are two words used in Scripture to indicate passage of time: "times," and "seasons." Jesus said to his disciples after the resurrection, "The times and seasons are not for you to know, but the Father has kept them in his power," {cf, Acts 1:7}. The "times" are great overall divisions of time in which God is working out some major purpose with man, such as, "the times of ignorance" that Paul refers to in Romans, which covers the whole of the Old Testament. The times are divided, in turn, into "seasons," which are marked by some special development within these time periods, much as we refer to the seasons of the year.

Some time ago I ran across a quotation by Archbishop Trench that was most illuminating in this respect:

The seasons [in Greek, the word *kairoi*] are the joints or articulations in the times: The critical epoch-making periods foreordained of God, when all that has been slowly and often without observation ripening through long ages is mature and comes to birth in grand, decisive events which constitute at once the close of one period and the commencement of another.

If you set June 6, 1967 in that context you will see that here indeed was a "grand, decisive event" which marked the close of one period and the commencement of another. If we are right in this, then it indicates that the last "season" in which Gentile authority will reign unchallenged in this world has already begun. Who knows how long it will last? We cannot set dates. There are no limitations on how long these seasons take to run their course. But according to our Lord's own prediction, this last of the seasons of the Gentiles has already begun.

Within this lengthy period called "the times of the Gentiles," which began with Nebuchadnezzar. this dream of the king as interpreted by Daniel indicates that there would be four world powers, and only four. It would begin with Babylon itself, the kingdom headed by Nebuchadnezzar. Let us read that now and quickly comment on a few things, leaving the rest for our next study.

"This was the dream; now we will tell the king its interpretation. 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 sons of men, the beasts of the field, and the birds of the air, making you rule over them all -- you are the head of gold. After you shall rise another kingdom inferior to you, and yet a third kingdom of bronze, which shall rule over all the earth. And there shall be a fourth kingdom, strong as iron, because iron breaks to pieces and shatters all things; and like iron which crushes, it shall break and crush all these." {Dan 2:36-40 RSV}

We shall be content now with identifying these four kingdoms. The first one, Daniel himself tells us, is the Babylonian empire headed by King Nebuchadnezzar. This would be followed, he says, by a second kingdom which would be inferior to the first. History identifies that clearly for us and, in fact, it came into the picture even before the book of Daniel closes. At the end of the book, Daniel is no longer under the Babylonian empire but is now serving under the Medio-Persian empire, that divided kingdom which followed Babylon as the ruler of the world. This, in turn, was to be followed by a third empire which would come upon the scene quickly. It is identified for us in Chapter 8 as the kingdom of Greece, under Alexander the Great. History has confirmed this, exactly as the book predicts.

The fourth empire is really the central study of this chapter. This strange, rather mysterious kingdom comes upon the scene after the Grecian kingdom. We usually call it the Roman Empire, but it is very striking that it is

never so called in the Bible. It is never identified by name though it includes the Roman Empire, and there is no doubt about that. It began in Rome as certain predictive passages in the New Testament make very clear. In Revelation, we have a clear identification of this empire with the city of Rome, seated upon its seven hills, so there is no question but what this fourth empire began with Rome.

But, since the period encompassed by the image covers all of time down to the second coming of Jesus Christ, the fourth kingdom must include far more than what we call in history, the Roman Empire. That is why it is never so named in the Bible. We will be much closer if we simply refer to it as "the West." That is the way we identify it today, "the Western nations." The prophecy centers upon what happens to these nations, especially as they near the end.

In our next study we shall give ourselves to the details that Daniel reveals about the West and its remarkable place in the processes of history. But I do want to point out one thing before we leave this, and that is that, in this image, there is a decreasing value from the head down to the feet. It begins with a head of gold, then silver, then bronze and, finally, iron -- so it is decreasing in value but increasing in strength -- until the final stage is reached, which is a mingling of iron and clay and there is no strength at all.

That is surely significant to us. It is important to note that Nebuchadnezzar was the most autocratic king to ever rule in all the world. Daniel himself says that God had given him authority over all the earth and he had the right to rule over all the world. He did not exercise it to that extent, but he exercised it to whatever degree he chose. No one ever withstood him; it was his successors who were finally overthrown by the Medio-Persian empire, as Daniel had predicted.

All this indicates that in God's sight the most perfect form of government is not a democracy but a monarchy. A monarchy is headed by a single individual whose will obtains throughout the length and breadth of his kingdom. Nebuchadnezzar symbolizes God's ideal of the best kind of government, but Nebuchadnezzar was by no means God's ideal monarch. This is made clear by other events in this book. The value of a monarchy is directly related to the individual who occupies the throne. Ultimately God's kingdom will prevail over all the earth with the right monarch on the throne -- the Lord Jesus Christ. That is why Paul refers to him as "that blessed and only sovereign" {1 Tim 6:15 RSV} who is about to appear -- the "Potentate" he is called in the King James Version, the Lord Jesus Christ, God's rightful King.

There are many fascinating things to be said about this, but I shall close with this emphasis: The remarkable thing about this dream is not these four divisions of man's kingdoms, but the strange, final kingdom which comes out of heaven as a stone cut without hands, and which strikes the feet of the image to destroy it.

It symbolizes what the Bible universally declares, that all the kingdoms of men will end at the appearing of God's kingdom. The prayer we so frequently pray in the Lord's prayer will at last be answered: "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven," {Matt 6:10b RSV}. This is what gives hope to our day.

We must be realistic as we look at life and realize that the investments we make in earthly kingdoms can, at best, only be of temporary value to us. The time that we have given to us is to be spent in that which lasts. The Bible does not prohibit making investment in earthly affairs, but it does urge that we handle these things realistically. Do not get yourself involved in them too deeply. Do not live for these things and make them a life-or-death matter. No, hold these things loosely and, rather, be sure you are investing in that which endures. Is this not what Jesus meant when he said, "Lay not up for yourselves treasures on earth but rather lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where rust does not corrupt, and moths do not eat, nor thieves break in to steal," {cf, Matt 6:19-20}. Our effort is to be invested in that which will endure beyond us, be worthwhile and meaningful far beyond the limits of this life.

That is why these predictive matters are set before us. There is a fatal flaw in man's kingdom. It is built upon a false foundation. As Jesus pointed out in the story of the two houses, one built on the rock and the other on sand, the ultimate explanation of what survives is the foundation. It is only that which is built upon the rock that will endure. Man's day, and man's kingdom (the Great Society, the New Deal, the Fair Deal, the New Frontier, and all the other political slogans that we are so used to) shall all be blown away before the wind. They are not wrong. There are elements in these that we must become involved in. But the final question is:

"Where has the thrust of your life been put?"

These prophetic matters are given, not to make us curious but to make us cautious; to lead us to invest in that which endures, to have a part in that which is real. Surely the greatest tragedy of all is to arrive at the end of life and, in the judgment of an eternal God, discover we have lived a wasted life. These things are needed, and are set before us, that we might have something by which to measure our life and help us distinguish between the temporary and the eternal, between the passing and the permanent. May God grant wisdom and understanding as we study these things together, to learn what is to happen in the days to come.

Prayer:

Grant to us, our Father, an understanding of these matters, even as Daniel, this mighty man of God who served so faithfully in his own day, prayed. Lord, give us understanding, give us insight, give us a sense of reality about these things that we may understand that this is indeed the mold into which history is being poured, and we would do well to know it and to follow it and to adjust our lives accordingly. We ask in Jesus' name, Amen.

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