



Class 12 - Ezekiel, Daniel

Old Testament Seminar - Immanuel Church

Ezekiel

A few weeks ago, we heard Isaiah warn Judah's King Hezekiah about the Assyrian army, while assuring him of God's care. Last week, we heard the prophet Jeremiah, who lived a century after Isaiah, urge Judah and Jerusalem to follow the Lord's direction by surrendering to the Babylonian army. This morning, we encounter the prophet Ezekiel who lived at the same time as Jeremiah, but whose ministry was actually set in exile in Babylon. Let's start off with a quick biographical sketch of Ezekiel, and an overview of the structure of the book.

The Babylonians carted Israelites off to exile in Babylon in several waves, and Ezekiel was among the earlier waves. He probably traveled to Babylon in 597 b.c., along with the royal family and other leading citizens of Jerusalem. Remember, Jerusalem was not entirely destroyed until a decade later. Ezekiel had been trained as a priest in Jerusalem, and he knew the religious life of his people well. Perhaps he'd even heard Jeremiah preach in Jerusalem before he was taken away. But once in exile away from the temple, it may have looked like this priest had no future serving God's people. After all, a priest's work was tied up with the temple. That's an important question. Will God still be with his people in exile? And that's the question God prepared this young priest to answer.

This book has been regarded as so strange that Jewish rabbis would often not allow young men to read it until they were thirty years old. But it's really not that hard to understand. Let me give you a quick overview before we dive in. Ezekiel's structure is even clearer than Isaiah's or Jeremiah's. It falls into two halves. In the first twenty-four chapters, the Lord tells his people that the Babylonians will destroy Jerusalem. The climax occurs in chapter 24 when word comes to Ezekiel that the siege has begun. Then chapters 25 to 48 turn to hope. They begin with condemnations of the surrounding nations, specifically, Ammon, Moab, Edom, Philistia, Tyre, and Egypt. Then in 33:21, word arrives that Jerusalem has fallen. From that point, Ezekiel prophesies about hope and restoration for God's people. The book largely occurs in chronological order, and Ezekiel's prophesies stretch over a two decade period — from around 593 to 571 b.c.

On top of this chronology, God gives Ezekiel three sequences of visions, and if you understand

these, you'll understand the book. The first sequence occurs in chapters 1-3, where Ezekiel, now in Babylon, sees God coming to him in a vision. The second sequence occurs in chapters 8-11. It's a flashback, as it were, in which God shows Ezekiel how his presence departed from Jerusalem because of the idolatrous worship being practiced in the temple. The book then concludes with a long vision sequence in chapters 40-48 when God returns to his people in a rebuilt temple.

So that's Ezekiel in a nutshell. For the rest of our time, I want us to follow the three sequences of visions the Lord gave to Ezekiel. We can summarize these three visions as: A Vision of God the King; A Vision of God's Departure; and A Vision of God's Coming and the Promise of Paradise.

A Vision of God the King

First, a vision of God the King. Have you ever seen a child do something wrong and then receive a "time out" in the corner for punishment? The Babylonian exile was like a big time out for God's people. He gave them a time out from the land, the throne, and the temple, all of which they had begun to misunderstand and even idolize. The Promised Land, the Davidic line of the kings, and the temple (which symbolized God's presence) were all good gifts from him. But the people had misused them. The gifts became too important. So God took them away by calling his people out to Babylon. He set them aside for seventy years so that they could refocus on what was important and why.

So let's think about this setting a bit. ***What do you think God's people were thinking as they sat there in exile?***

The amazing truth of Ezekiel is that God actually went with his people into exile. And that's how Ezekiel's vision begins. With God coming to his people apart from the temple, the line of David, or the land of Israel.

God appears to Ezekiel in an extraordinary opening vision, which begins with the words,

"In the thirtieth year, in the fourth month, on the fifth day of the month, as I was among the exiles by the Chebar canal, the heavens were opened, and I saw visions of God." (1:1).

The vision itself begins with a mighty wind:

"As I looked, behold, a stormy wind came out of the north, and a great cloud, with brightness around it, and fire flashing forth continually, and in the midst of the fire, as it were gleaming metal. And from the midst of it came the likeness of four

living creatures. And this was their appearance: they had a human likeness, but each had four faces, and each of them had four wings.” (1:4-6).

As the vision continues, we see some very bizarre creatures surrounding God’s throne:

“Now as I looked at the living creatures, I saw a wheel on the earth beside the living creatures, one for each of the four of them. As for the appearance of the wheels and their construction: their appearance was like the gleaming of beryl. And the four had the same likeness, their appearance and construction being as it were a wheel within a wheel. When they went, they went in any of their four directions without turning as they went. And their rims were tall and awesome, and the rims of all four were full of eyes all around. And when the living creatures went, the wheels went beside them; and when the living creatures rose from the earth, the wheels rose.” (1:15-19).

After further description of these creatures, a voice sounds out overhead. And then the throne itself appears:

“And there came a voice from above the expanse over their heads. When they stood still, they let down their wings. And above the expanse over their heads there was the likeness of a throne, in appearance like sapphire; and seated above the likeness of a throne was a likeness with a human appearance. And upward from what had the appearance of his waist I saw as it were gleaming metal, like the appearance of fire enclosed all around. And downward from what had the appearance of his waist I saw as it were the appearance of fire, and there was brightness around him. Like the appearance of the bow that is in the cloud on the day of rain, so was the appearance of the brightness all around.” (1:25-28).

Let’s pull out five observations about God from this vision.

God Is Not Like Us

Many people have tried to draw — literally illustrate — what this vision must have looked like to Ezekiel. But that’s probably an impossible task. And that’s the whole point. What Ezekiel could see in this vision was that God is not like us. He is strange, other, and different than we are. Often, we assume God is just like us. But Ezekiel’s vision let’s us see how God is an entirely different being than we are. We cannot simply make him over in our own image. He is unusual.

Ezekiel did not hesitate to describe everything he did see, but notice how often he used the words “appearance” and “as it were.” It was “the likeness of a throne, in appearance like sapphire,” and below the figure’s apparent waist, it looked “as it were the appearance of fire.”

The Bible calls God “holy.” And it’s not that he just possesses holiness; he *is* holy. Therefore, we must show reverence to God. Ezekiel himself fell face down, even after all his theological training! His new knowledge of God did not make him feel more casual about God at all. He is awed by this vision of God, like Job was awed when he had a vision of God.

God Is All-Powerful and All-Wise

We see here, too, that God is all-powerful and all-wise. Perhaps you noticed that the rims of the wheels are covered with eyes (1:18). And the four faces look in every direction (1:6,10,17). These things show God’s omniscience—he sees everywhere. There is nothing he does not perceive. He is all-knowing. And the fact that God can be on this chariot that moves in all directions shows that he is all-powerful. He can be in any place. Ezekiel could trust this all-powerful and all-wise God!

God Is Not Limited by Circumstances

But the real point for Ezekiel was that he was seeing God at all. After all, he was not in Jerusalem or in the temple. He was in exile when he had a vision of God Almighty! God is not limited to Jerusalem. The vision assured Ezekiel that God would be with his people wherever they were scattered. Indeed, God is not limited to any one place. He has a concern for the whole world, as the rainbow in verse 28, recalling God’s covenant with Noah for the whole world, reminds us.

God Takes the Initiative

Notice also that God takes the initiative. He is the one who comes to us. Look again at verse 1: “the heavens were opened.” He chose to come down. Ezekiel didn’t open the heavens and go to him. Then verse 3: “the word of the Lord came.” And verse 4: “As I looked, behold, a stormy wind came out of the north.” Then in verse 25: “there came a voice.” And finally verse 28: “I heard the voice of one speaking.”

Like Moses and the burning bush. Like Isaiah in the temple. Like Paul on the road to Damascus.

So with Ezekiel. None of these men were out looking for God or initiated with him. This God takes the initiative. He comes to us.

God Communicates

And this God communicates. Did you notice that Ezekiel's vision climaxes in a voice? In words? If we were choreographing this vision, we would not do it this way. These days, we would want a spectacle — a show for the eyes. But here, God's vision climaxes not with something for the eyes, but with a word to the ears — "I heard the voice of one speaking" (1:28).

This is why the God's Word is central in our church's gatherings. We take time to hear from God's Word because he speaks to us through his Word. God is committed to speaking to his people, to knowing them, and to having them know him. And so with Ezekiel.

[Questions]

A Vision of God's Departure

The second great vision in this book is a flashback. It's a vision of God's departure from the temple in Jerusalem. And this vision reminds us of how far away we are from paradise. That true paradise won't be found on this earth.

Certainly, Ezekiel's fellow exiles in Babylon knew this. They knew Babylon wasn't paradise. But Ezekiel's vision showed them that neither was Jerusalem! They'd gone to great lengths to protect Jerusalem, thinking that holding onto Jerusalem was holding onto God. But that was wrong. So Ezekiel was given another vision, or series of visions, in which he saw the sin of Israel and God's evacuation of Jerusalem. God turned his people over to the care of the gods they really loved.

Chapters 6 to 24 are prophecies against Israel because of its sin. God wants the people to know exactly why he's deserted them. The prophecies against Israel begin in chapters 6 and 7, and the Lord promises, "I will turn my face away from [my people]" (7:22), just as he promised through Jeremiah: "I will show them my back, not my face" (Jer. 18:17). But the core of God's complaint against his people is shown to Ezekiel in chapters 8 to 11. Beginning in chapters 8 and 9, God gives him a very specific vision of the idolatry being practiced in the temple itself. In chapters 10 and 11, the vision continues, but now Ezekiel sees God departing from the temple and its grounds, just as the people had departed from the worship of God. The vision ends in chapter 11 as the Lord departs the city itself. Here's a sample of this vision:

“The hand of the Lord God fell upon me there. Then I looked, and behold, a form that had the appearance of a man. Below what appeared to be his waist was fire, and above his waist was something like the appearance of brightness, like gleaming metal. He put out the form of a hand and took me by a lock of my head, and the Spirit lifted me up between earth and heaven and brought me in visions of God to Jerusalem, to the entrance of the gateway of the inner court that faces north, where was the seat of the image of jealousy, which provokes to jealousy” (8:1-3).

“And he said to me, “Go in, and see the vile abominations that they are committing here.” So I went in and saw. And there, engraved on the wall all around, was every form of creeping things and loathsome beasts, and all the idols of the house of Israel (8:9-10).

“Then the cherubim lifted up their wings, with the wheels beside them, and the glory of the God of Israel was over them. And the glory of the Lord went up from the midst of the city and stood on the mountain that is on the east side of the city. And the Spirit lifted me up and brought me in the vision by the Spirit of God into Chaldea, to the exiles. Then the vision that I had seen went up from me.” (11:22-24).

The people had caused this unnatural separation, this divorce, between them and God by pursuing other gods! And in chapters 16, 20, and 23, the Lord uses the most graphic of language to charge Jerusalem with heinous unfaithfulness. He says to them,

“But you trusted in your beauty and played the whore because of your renown and lavished your whorings on any passerby; your beauty became his. You took some of your garments and made for yourself colorful shrines, and on them played the whore. The like has never been, nor ever shall be. You also took your beautiful jewels of my gold and of my silver, which I had given you, and made for yourself images of men, and with them played the whore. And you took your embroidered garments to cover them, and set my oil and my incense before them. Also my bread that I gave you—I fed you with fine flour and oil and honey — you set before them for a pleasing aroma; and so it was, declares the Lord God” (16:15-19).

Many years before Ezekiel’s day, God had warned his people through Moses that he would send them into exile if they were unfaithful to him. In one of Moses’ final speeches to the people of Israel before they entered the Promised Land, he prophesied this: “And as the Lord took delight in doing you good and multiplying you, so the Lord will take delight in bringing ruin upon you and destroying you. And you shall be plucked off the land that you are entering to take possession

of it. And the Lord will scatter you among all peoples” (Deut. 28:63-64).

God’s people, as I said, caused this unnatural separation, this divorce. And now they would pay the price. After all the stinging indictments against Israel’s unfaithfulness that we’ve read, we read at the beginning of chapter 24:2, “Son of man, write down the name of this day, this very day. The king of Babylon has laid siege to Jerusalem this very day.” In the siege, Jerusalem began to bear the punishment of God’s desertion.

In chapters 25 to 32 and chapter 35, Ezekiel’s attention shifts away from the Israelites and onto the nations. As we learned from the final chapters of Jeremiah in our previous study, we learn here that God’s justice is not confined to his people. The nations that looked victorious, both to themselves and to the exiled Israelites, were in trouble with God. God would judge them as well. God’s people could be certain that God alone was sovereign over all nations.

Then in chapters 33 and 34, God takes his own people to task once more for two reasons. First, he says, the leaders are corrupt and only take care of themselves (34:2). Second, the people themselves have ignored his Word:

“As for you, son of man, your people who talk together about you by the walls and at the doors of the houses, say to one another, each to his brother, ‘Come, and hear what the word is that comes from the Lord.’ And they come to you as people come, and they sit before you as my people, and they hear what you say but they will not do it; for with lustful talk in their mouths they act; their heart is set on their gain. And behold, you are to them like one who sings lustful songs with a beautiful voice and plays well on an instrument, for they hear what you say, but they will not do it.” (33:30-32).

The people would simultaneously sit, hear, and enjoy God’s Word and then ignore it! They would go through all the motions of worshiping God, but their hearts were devoted to idols. In short, the people of Israel were tempted to trust the wealth of their land. They were tempted to trust the political stability of the Davidic line, and even the temple itself. All the while ignoring God’s Word. So none of these things would save God’s people.

A Vision of God’s Coming and the Promise of Paradise

The last section of Ezekiel’s prophecy contains several more famous visions of hope. In chapter 36, for instance, we read about God’s remarkable promise to gather his people from the nations, cleanse them from their impurities and idols, replace their hearts of stone with hearts of flesh,

and grant them his Spirit who will move them to follow his ways and keep his commands (36:24-28). In chapter 37, we watch how this will be done in Ezekiel's remarkable vision of the valley of the dry bones. Ezekiel preaches God's Word, and the bones come to life!

The last great series of visions in the book then occur in chapters 40 to 48, where God shows Ezekiel a new temple. The first temple had been destroyed in the Babylonian invasion after God's departure.

Now, some people may regard this final vision of a new temple as a boring addition that clutters our Bibles and confuses our minds. Is this just architectural doodling by an unemployed priest in Babylon with nothing better to do?

Of course not! Instead, God says to Ezekiel, "Son of man, look with your eyes, and hear with your ears, and set your heart upon all that I shall show you, for you were brought here in order that I might show it to you. Declare all that you see to the house of Israel" (40:4). This is the climax of the whole book. Most likely, Ezekiel's listeners would have been enthralled by this vision. Most of all, God's pledge to be with his people would have kept his audience in rapt attention.

This is what the vision of God returning to a re-built temple in chapter 43 is all about. Even as Ezekiel had seen the glory of the Lord depart from the temple and the city in chapters 10 and 11, now he watches God return to his temple:

"Then he led me to the gate, the gate facing east. And behold, the glory of the God of Israel was coming from the east. And the sound of his coming was like the sound of many waters, and the earth shone with his glory. And the vision I saw was just like the vision that I had seen when he came to destroy the city, and just like the vision that I had seen by the Chebar canal. And I fell on my face. As the glory of the Lord entered the temple by the gate facing east, the Spirit lifted me up and brought me into the inner court; and behold, the glory of the Lord filled the temple" (43:1-5).

Ezekiel prophesied that the exiles would return to the land, and here he promises that the destroyed temple would be rebuilt and filled again with the presence of God. God would once again be with his people. From God's renewed presence and rule, unnumbered blessings would flow, even as a river would flow out of the new temple (ch. 47).

The purpose of this temple vision was to highlight a restored relationship of God with his people. So the final verse of the book is a fitting ascription: "And the name of the city from that time on will be: "the Lord is there" (48:35b). The book leaves us with the picture of God forever with his

people. Ezekiel is, in a sense, the Old Testament equivalent to the book of Revelation, especially given Revelation's closing visions of God, God's judgment, and the heavenly city.

In the book of Ezra, we learn that the exiles did return to the Promised Land and rebuild the temple, yet we have no record of the glory of the Lord filling the temple as it did at Solomon's inauguration of the first temple. But centuries later, Immanuel himself would enter the precincts of the temple in Jerusalem. And in that final vision of the heavenly city in the book of Revelation, communion with God would become even more intimate. God's people would celebrate not just in his presence, as wonderful as that is, but in full view of him, dwelling with him forever!

Like Revelation, Ezekiel closes with the glorious hope of paradise. Each tribe is promised a portion of a renewed land, and a land which seems to point beyond what Ezra and Nehemiah returned to find. A land we still look forward to.

For our purposes here, two questions still need to be answered. First, why would God offer this renewed hope for his unfaithful people? Above all else, God promises to change his people and restore them to himself for his own name's sake.

“It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but *for the sake of my holy name*, which you have profaned among the nations to which you came. And I will vindicate *the holiness of my great name*, which has been profaned among the nations, and which you have profaned among them. And the nations will know that *I am the Lord*, declares the Lord God, when through you I vindicate *my holiness* before their eyes” (36:22-23; emphasis added).

Second, *how* will God restore sinners to himself? After all, he is holy. How can he disregard heinous sin and bring sinners into his presence? Well, Ezekiel only shines a light dimly on the answer to this question; but we do see that God will not simply disregard this sin, he will deal with it. Repeatedly, God calls Ezekiel the “son of man.” And this son of man symbolizes the bearing of sin on his body when he lays on his side (4:4,5,6). And in chapter 16, God promises a time “when I atone” for faithless Israel (16:63).

God also promises that a day would come when he would judge the people's useless shepherds and “set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd. And I, the Lord, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them.” (34:23-24). On that day, he will also grant his people a “covenant of peace” (34:25). Who would this coming shepherd be? Who does this son of man point to? None other than Jesus Christ, who called himself the son of man and lay down his life for his sheep (John 10:15). By laying down his life on the cross, he paid for the sins of all those who would ever

repent and believe. He brought peace for the rebels ready to lay down their arms. He brought forgiveness for the sinners who wanted to be done with sin and knew they could do nothing to forgive themselves. Only through Christ can we be reconciled to the Father.

So that's our tour of Ezekiel. God is with his people, and he will make a way for them to be truly with him in heaven. But to see more of that future, heavenly vision — we'll have to look to Daniel which is what we'll do next.

Daniel

The book of 1 Peter begins as follows: "Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to God's elect, strangers in the world.."

What does Peter mean by calling us "strangers in the world?" [Wait for answers.] Well, all that leads to a good question for us. What does it mean to live in the world as a stranger — and yet still live in the world?

That's what we'll be looking at in the book of Daniel this morning. An interesting book, given that the first six chapters, with accounts like the fiery furnace and the lion's den, are so familiar. And yet the last six chapters are some of the least-read in Scripture because they're so confusing. My hope is that across the next few minutes we can piece it together as one book. And, along the way, learn what it means to live as strangers in this world.

First, some context.

Context

Daniel is the only book that spans the entire exile. A teenager when he was taken captive to Babylon during the first wave of exiles, Daniel was still in Babylon as an old man, when the Jews began returning to Jerusalem in 536/537 BC.¹ Daniel spends that entire time in the city of Babylon. The Babylonians were conquered by the Medes & Persians in 539 BC. So, chapters 1-4, 7, and 8 occur during the reign of the Babylonians. Chapter 5 records the fall of the last Babylonian king, and the takeover by the Medes. And chapters 9 and 6 record events that occurred during the reign of the new empire, called the Medo-Persian Empire. God's people, it seems, are just caught up as pawns in this great battle for dominance.

¹He may have died just shortly before the first wave returned.

And that really captures the redemptive-historical context of the book. The question on the table is this. Who rules the earth? Is God really in control? Or is he also at the whims of these empires? And, equally importantly, how ought the people of God behave through all of this? Those are the questions that Daniel will answer.

Theme

And the answer will come basically in this form:

The Most High, the God of Daniel, sovereignly rules and reigns supreme over all mankind. Therefore His people are brave in the face of persecution.

You'll notice in that first sentence that I didn't refer to God by His covenant name, Yahweh, as we have so often since we were in the book of Exodus. Well, that's because Daniel doesn't either. With the exception of one reference to Yahweh in chapter 9, God is largely referred to in this book as "the Most High." Thus the lack of the capital letters "Lord" in your English language Bibles. What Daniel is doing is emphasizing that his god is God over all peoples on earth, not just the Jews. And, as you'll recall, these people are in exile. They have been called "not my people" by Hosea. So how fitting it is that in chapter 9 when the word "Yahweh" reappears, it is as Daniel prays about the end of the exile. That one little hint — the use of God's name — tells us so much about the message of this book.

For some books of the Bible, we can basically wander in and understand what the author's doing. For others, knowing the book's structure can help quite a bit — and Daniel most certainly falls into that second category. Think of what you know about the book of Daniel. It begins in chapter 1, verses 1-4 with Daniel and the nation of Judah going into exile. And then near the end, Daniel chapter 9, we see that it's time for the exile to be finished. Move a little further in. Chapter 2 focuses on king Nebuchadnezzar's vision of a statue representing four great kingdoms. Now, with the end of the exile in chapter 9 we move a little bit further in and we see, in chapters 7 and 8, more visions of kingdoms, with four kingdoms again in chapter 7. In all, the content of the first half of the book is recapitulated in the second half. For those of you familiar with the term, the book of Daniel — like many other pieces of ancient literature — is structured as a "chiasm." That is, pairs of parallel passages that work from the ends of the book to its middle where the main point lies. You can see that in the outline in your handout.

Do you see that chiastic mirroring here? The outside pairs are the two parallels I just mentioned. And then the middle, the main point, is the two sections labeled 'a' and 'b' where we have stories

of two kings being humbled from what they thought they were untouchable places of sovereignty. And set in the middle of those two stories we find **chapter 4, verses 34 and 35**.

At the end of the days I, Nebuchadnezzar, lifted my eyes to heaven, and my reason returned to me, and I blessed the Most High, and praised and honored him who lives forever, for his dominion is an everlasting dominion, and his kingdom endures from generation to generation; all the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, and he does according to his will among the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth; and none can stay his hand or say to him, "What have you done?"

That is the point of the book. God has humbled even the great king Nebuchadnezzar, conqueror of Judah.

Now, for clarity's sake, I should point out that some of the parallels in Daniel are quite clear; others aren't as much. So different scholars have slightly different versions of this chiasm. We won't concern ourselves today with exactly how the structure works out. We'll simply note that (1) the book is built around this amazing humbling of the kings of men. And (2) the accounts in the first half can help us understand the visions of the second half.

So how do we get into this book? Well, to help you understand the structure better, we'll take the chapters that are meant to reinforce each other and look at those pairs together. We'll start in the middle and work our way out.

Daniel 4, 5

So we'll start in chapters 4 and 5. In these two chapters we have prideful kings who believe that they rule by their own might. They believe that they are the king of kings. We'll take each in turn.

The first is Nebuchadnezzar, king of the Babylonians. In the first part of **chapter 4**, Nebuchadnezzar has a dream of a large tree with different birds nesting in it, which is suddenly chopped down. By this time Daniel has risen far in the Babylonian government because of the wisdom God's given him. He's also shown himself to be an accurate interpreter of dreams. Of course, God's the one who gives him the interpretations. Anyway, in **4:24-26** Daniel gives the king this interpretation of the dream.

It is a decree of the Most High, which has come upon my lord the king, that you shall

be driven from among men, and your dwelling shall be with the beasts of the field. You shall be made to eat grass like an ox, and you shall be wet with the dew of heaven, and seven periods of time shall pass over you, till you know that the Most High rules the kingdom of men and gives it to whom he will. And as it was commanded to leave the stump of the roots of the tree, your kingdom shall be confirmed for you from the time that you know that Heaven rules.

Now whether or not Nebuchadnezzar believed Daniel or not the text doesn't say. But the prophesy came true. In verse 31, as he is reveling in his greatness, a voice from heaven speaks and he is struck with some kind of insanity that strips him of his ability to rule. And he didn't recover until he confesses those verses we read earlier as the main point of the book. And so the story ends with Nebuchadnezzar uttering these words in verse 37. "Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and extol and honor the King of heaven, for all his works are right and his ways are just; and those who walk in pride he is able to humble." And that last sentence leads us right into chapter 4's sister chapter, chapter 5.

In **chapter 5** the Most High delivers the same message to another king. By now Nebuchadnezzar is dead and Belshazzar is running Babylon.² However, Belshazzar didn't learn that lesson from Nebuchadnezzar. Instead he threw himself a big party and used, as drinking goblets, the sacred vessels from the temple in Jerusalem! Just like Nebuchadnezzar, he's given a vision from the Most High, this time in the form of handwriting suddenly appearing on the wall, putting a real damper on his merrymaking. But he doesn't know what the writing means, and so Daniel is called in to interpret. After soundly rebuking the king — Daniel is no respecter of men — he provides the interpretation in verses 26-28. "God has numbered the days of your kingdom and brought it to an end... you have been weighed in the balances and found wanting... your kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and Persians." And that very night Belshazzar is killed.

Again, the point of it all is that the Most High will brook no rivals. He alone rules over Heaven and Earth. And the same is true today. God's not changed. So when His people see kingdoms rising and falling and governing in godless ways, they need not fear that the Lord does not see and is somehow off His throne.³

[TAKE QUESTIONS]

²Belshazzar was not the king of Babylon, but only the coregent of the city for his father, Nabonidus, who was at the time elsewhere in the empire.

³This is much the point that Augustine makes in *The City of God*.

Daniel 3, 6

Let's work our way out from those central chapters to see what a theology of divine sovereignty looks like when it runs up against more arrogant kings. We'll look now at chapters 3 and 6.

Chapter 3 contains that famous story of Daniel's three friends, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego, in the fiery furnace. Nebuchadnezzar sets up a gold image of himself that all must worship.

Well, like proper monotheists who still love their covenantal God, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego will not bow down and will not worship the image. In response, Nebuchadnezzar is furious that anyone would challenge his universal authority. End of verse 15: "And who is the god who will deliver you out of my hands?" Really, Nebuchadnezzar? Let's see.

In response, we find these three men as brave as Daniel. Some amazing words in verse 16:

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego answered and said to the king, "O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter. If this be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of your hand, O king. But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up."

That's backbone!!

Well, as you can imagine, an answer like that seals their fate and into the fire they go. But God rescues them! Not only are they completely protected, but they are joined by a fourth, who, according to the king, looks like a "son of the gods." So, Nebuchadnezzar, "who is the god who will deliver you out of my hands?" The God of the Jews, that's who. And so Nebuchadnezzar is astonished, as we see in verse 29.

In **chapter 6** we have a similar account. This time the king is Darius,⁴ and the faithful Jewish victim is Daniel. This Daniel in the lion's den. By now Daniel is an old man, and has enemies as well as friends. As the well-known story goes, Daniel's enemies look for a way to trap him but can't find anything scandalous in him. So they decide to go after the one thing that sticks out: his commitment to pray to his God. They convince Darius to pass a decree outlawing prayer to any god but Darius — and then go and catch Daniel in this criminal act. The punishment? To be thrown into the lion's den.

But once again, God rescues his servant. And once again, God turns the mouth of a pagan king to His praise. Darius' words in verses 26-27:

⁴Darius may not be a name, but a title (like Caesar) for Cyrus, king of the Medes.

I make a decree, that in all my royal dominion people are to tremble and fear before the God of Daniel,
for he is the living God,
 enduring forever;
his kingdom shall never be destroyed,
 and his dominion shall be to the end.
He delivers and rescues;
 he works signs and wonders
 in heaven and on earth,
he who has saved Daniel
 from the power of the lions.

The point? God is on his throne. But a primary implication of this is important: just because the true God reigns, doesn't mean that His people will be exempt from persecution. In fact, it means that they will be the target of all the more persecution.⁵ The allegiance of God's people to him will appear a challenge to any earthly claim to sovereignty. So God's people will seem to only be in the way in any earthly power grab. But it's because of that confidence, that indeed the Most High does rule over the kingdoms of men, that the persecuted and afflicted people of God are willing to endure great trial and tribulation for the sake of the God they love.⁶

Do you see how God's preparing his people for the age in which we now live? King Solomon could hardly have thought of himself as a stranger and alien in this world; he ruled at what for all intents and purposes was the very center of the world. But by the time we get to Daniel, God is using his prophets to teach us what it looks like to be citizens of a kingdom that is not of this world. The final culmination of God's kingdom is yet to come.

[TAKE QUESTIONS]

Daniel 2, 7-8

Well, on to our next pairing: chapters 2, 7 and 8⁷

⁵2 Timothy 3:12 says that "Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted."

⁶I again think of Augustine teaching us that the City of God is always under attack by the City of Man, but it's the City of God that will persevere in the end.

⁷Now, there may not be time for this in the class, but it sure is interesting enough to note: Daniel is here portrayed as a new Joseph. There are many similarities between them. They are both captured and oppressed by Gentiles when they are young. They both rise high in the service of the Gentiles, second in command no less. They are both falsely accused. They are both delivered by God in life threatening situations. They both interpret dreams. And they both ascribe their ability to interpret dreams to God in the face of others who cannot interpret them relying

In **chapter 2** Nebuchadnezzar has a dream. This time he has a large statue, the meaning of which only Daniel can interpret.⁸ The statue that Nebuchadnezzar saw had a head made of gold, chest and arms of silver, belly and thighs of bronze, and feet of an iron/clay mix (cf. vv. 31-33). But it's destroyed by a rock, thrown it seems, from heaven, that grows to fill the whole earth. Daniel explains the meaning of the dream, that God had told him. He says in the following verses that each section of the statue represents four successive kingdoms. Nebuchadnezzar's kingdom is the golden head, but the Babylonians will be succeeded by three other kingdoms. The last of which will be as strong as iron, yet at the same time as fragile as clay because it will be divided. And what about that rock that smashed the statue and itself grew into a mountain? Look at **verse 44**. It's God's own kingdom.

And now I ask you. ***How did that get fulfilled?*** [WAIT FOR SOMEONE TO ANSWER] Even Daniel's interpretation is a little cloudy because it pertains to events he didn't witness. But for us, who are further along in history, we see more precisely what's going on here. As we already said, the Babylonian Empire was taken over by the Medo-Persian Empire in 539 BC. That empire is the silver chest and arms. Then, in around 332 BC the Kingdom of Persia was conquered by Alexander the Great of Greece. The Grecian Empire is represented by the legs of bronze. That then gave way to the feet of iron and clay, the Roman Empire, in the 2nd and 1st centuries BC.

But what we're most interested in is that rock cut out without hands! That of course is the Kingdom of Heaven, and its ruler is the Lord Jesus Christ. His conquest didn't come through military might, but through the preaching of the gospel. Over time, though he conquered the hearts and the minds of many in the Roman Empire. And, just as we read with the mountain filling the whole earth in verse 35, Christ's Kingdom has spread throughout the entire world. And as we read in verse 44, it is forever. So what Daniel sees here is the victory of the preaching of Christ and the spread of His Church to every tongue, tribe, people, and nation. Amen!

Now, with that we jump ahead to **chapter 7**. And what we see there is that this vision of four kingdoms isn't just an exercise in prediction. It is there to teach an important truth.

Turn to **chapter 7**. Here Daniel has a dream of four beasts. The first resembles a lion with eagle's wings, the second a bear devouring bones, the third a leopard with four wings and four heads, and the fourth is so terrible that there's no animal to compare it to.

on their religious means. The point of all this is most likely to encourage the people of God that as He had been with His people before in a foreign land to protect them, He will do so again. And afterwards, as He brought His people out of Egypt, He will bring them out of Babylon too. The "new Joseph" is a sign unto all these things. And both are types of Christ.

⁸Actually, Daniel is able to recount to Nebuchadnezzar the content of the dream as well without having first been told. All of this, of course, comes from the sovereign hand of God (cf. 2:19-23, 27-30).

Then, Daniel has a vision of God, whom he calls The Ancient of Days. Let's see what happens. Look at **verse 9**.

“As I looked,
thrones were placed,
 and the Ancient of Days took his seat;
his clothing was white as snow,
 and the hair of his head like pure wool;
his throne was fiery flames;
 its wheels were burning fire.

A stream of fire issued
 and came out from before him;
a thousand thousands served him,
 and ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him;
the court sat in judgment,
 and the books were opened.

“I looked then because of the sound of the great words that the horn was speaking. And as I looked, the beast was killed, and its body destroyed and given over to be burned with fire. As for the rest of the beasts, their dominion was taken away, but their lives were prolonged for a season and a time.

So God destroys these beasts. Who takes the power and dominion that was once theirs? Look at **verse 13**.

“I saw in the night visions,
and behold, with the clouds of heaven
 there came one like a son of man,
and he came to the Ancient of Days
 and was presented before him.
And to him was given 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.

Who is this “one like a son of man” who will rule forever with power given Him by God? [WAIT FOR SOMEONE TO ANSWER] When Jesus was on trial, and asked who He was, He referred to this passage! Listen to **Mark 14:61-62**. “Again the high priest asked him, ‘Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?’ And Jesus said, ‘I am, and you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven.’ Jesus alone approached the living God, and reigns with Him, and He will return to earth on the clouds of heaven to publicly take what is rightfully His! We know by faith that He currently reigns. Soon all will see it.

Verse 17 tells us that these four great beasts are four kingdoms. So do you see how chapters 2 and 7 help interpret each other? Chapter two is referring to current events in Daniel’s day. And it’s much more narrative than apocalyptic. Four earthly kingdoms that, today, we can call by name. But without chapter 7, we might miss the main point about that rock that fills the earth. Chapter 7 shows that this immediate, chapter 2 view of the future points ahead to a still greater fulfillment. Four beasts that don’t simply represent specific kingdoms — even as the “beast” imagery in Revelation refers generally to the earthly opponents of God. And then a culmination that’s more specific — and more amazing. When the kingdom of the son of man is finally and firmly established. A fulfillment toward which we are still yearning.

I’ll leave it to you to study **chapter 8** on your own. Something similar thing is going on.

[TAKE QUESTIONS]

Daniel 1, 9

And that means that we’ve finally made it to chapter 1! We’ll pair it with chapter 9. In chapter 1 the people of God go into exile. And in chapter 9 the people of God are ready to come out! (Cf. 1:2 & 9:2.)

In **chapter 1**, we see all four of the Jewish boys, Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego,⁹ placed in a Babylonian prep school of sorts. They’re put there because they’ve shown potential to someday serve the king. Well, while there they bravely ask to be exempt from eating foods outside of their religious dietary laws. And the result? God’s blessing on them. Even in exile, God blesses his people — and gives them wisdom (verse 17)— another theme through this book.

Finally, let’s look at the wonderfully encouraging **chapter 9**. Look at verse 2. **How did Daniel**

⁹The last three of which being their given Babylonian names.

know the exile was almost over? [Wait for an answer] What a novel concept! For encouragement, and understanding, Daniel reads the Bible! You'll remember from Jeremiah that no one was listening to Jeremiah. Well, Daniel was. The prayer that follows, beginning in verse 3, is eloquent and moving. You can tell from reading it that Daniel truly knows his God. It's a good challenge for us all to adopt this kind of language in our own prayers. In fact, I'd encourage you to read and meditate on this chapter this week. And like I said before, it's particularly exciting in the context of Daniel because Daniel again refers to God as "**Yahweh, our God!**" The end of the exile is here!

But again, the parallel with chapter 1 is helpful. Remember in chapter 1, the exile wasn't just a physical exile. The physical exile merely reflected an ongoing spiritual exile. The people had rejected their God. And Nebuchadnezzar was trying to assimilate these Israelites into pagan culture. So, we'd expect in chapter 9 to see something about an end to both the physical and the spiritual exile. And so we do. The physical exile is about to end, as we saw in verse 2. But, **the real exile**, the exile that began when Adam and Eve were kicked out of the Garden of Eden, the exile from God that we all experience because of our sins, will not end simply with the Jews' return to Jerusalem. *That* exile, the exile the Jewish exile merely points to, ends only when Christ makes atonement for our sins. Look at 9:24-25.

"Seventy weeks are decreed about your people and your holy city, to finish the transgression, to put an end to sin, and to atone for iniquity, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal both vision and prophet, and to anoint a most holy place. Know therefore and understand that from the going out of the word to restore and build Jerusalem to the coming of an anointed one, a prince, there shall be seven weeks.

So what do we see here: an end to sin! After seventy weeks. And an anointed one, a prince. Who, verse 26, "shall be cut off and shall have nothing." What's going on here? Well, the seventy years of physical exile have finished. But these seventy weeks, these seventy "sevens" — whatever they are — are just beginning. But that their end will be God's final answer to his people's sin in the atoning death and triumphant return of Jesus Christ.

[TAKE QUESTIONS]

Daniel 10-12

Finally, that brings us to chapter 10. Chapters 10-12 don't sit in that mirroring structure with the first 9 chapters, but they're just as important. They contain more predictive prophecies about the

future of the people of God. And like what we've seen so far, the fulfillment of these prophecies is both near-term and in the last days. I'll leave you to study these chapters and see for yourself how they continue the theme of God's rule over all nations.

Conclusion

So how does Daniel speak to our life as exiles in this world? It reminds us, chapters 4-5, that those who set themselves up against the Most High will indeed be humbled, whether to their everlasting benefit or everlasting regret. It shows us, chapters 3 and 6, what it looks like to be faithful servants of a sovereign lord even when we suffer persecution and opposition for our faith. It helps us see, chapters 2 and 7/8, how the "great powers" around us are all passing away and that God's kingdom on earth is indeed coming. It shines light on the hope Daniel had, that we can now see clearly of the end to our spiritual exile that has come in Christ. And it looks forward, chapters 10-12, to the eternal reward that's waiting when we finally arrive home.

[TAKE QUESTIONS]

[PRAY]

This material is adapted from a course with the same name developed by Capitol Hill Baptist Church. It has been modified for our purposes and has been condensed to fit our time schedule. The original version is available on their website at <https://www.capitolhillbaptist.org/resources/core-seminars/series/old-testament-overview/>