

Daily Bible Guide—Daniel and Esther **Week 2**

Monday, September 17th

Daniel 4:19-37

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

35 All the peoples of the earth
are regarded as nothing.
He does as he pleases

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with the powers of heaven
and the peoples of the earth.
No one can hold back his hand
or say to him: "What have you done?"

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

Points of Interest:

- 'his thoughts terrified him'—ancient Near Eastern monarchs didn't necessarily live by the old adage, 'Don't shoot the messenger.' The previous dream, while delivering a sobering message about worldly power in general, contained much that could have been flattering personally to Nebuchadnezzar: he is the golden head of the kings of this world, but after him lesser kings will see their kingdoms fall apart and disappear. This new dream is bad news specifically aimed at Nebuchadnezzar himself. Daniel seems to be afraid of Nebuchadnezzar's reaction. Daniel deals with this tricky situation sensitively, hinting that he has bad news for the king and showing that he takes no glee in the king's misfortune. In response, the king offers him immunity from punishment. Nebuchadnezzar in essence tells Daniel, 'I can tell it's bad news, I still want to hear it; and I won't hold it against you.'
- 'Your Majesty, you are that tree'—this dream starts similarly to the last one, with a picture of Nebuchadnezzar's greatness. While the statue dream stressed Nebuchadnezzar's grandeur and power, this one focuses on the benefits to his subjects: he provides protection and provision for countless people.
- 'You will be driven away from people and will live with the wild animals'—the king will experience a precipitous drop, from the very pinnacle of power to about as low as you can go, from being a provider of food and shelter to many nations to not even having adequate food and shelter himself, from a great ruler to a homeless madman.
- 'It may be that then your prosperity will continue'—Daniel sees in the fact that the stump is not uprooted a sliver of hope that the king could rise again, or perhaps even avoid falling altogether. Nebuchadnezzar doesn't immediately take the deal offered him, but he finds that the offer still stands when he does remember it and accept it.
- 'the great Babylon I have built'—this isn't mere boastfulness on Nebuchadnezzar's part. While Babylon had been a famous city of architectural wonder for hundreds of years already before Nebuchadnezzar, he took it a step further, almost completely renovating it in quite impressive fashion. Under him, the Euphrates River was re-engineered, a new palace and temple complex were built, and the famous Hanging Gardens of Babylon—which were one of the seven wonders of the ancient world—were designed (*Bible Background Commentary* 736). Nebuchadnezzar did for Babylon what the Renaissance architects and artists did for Rome: added to and in some ways surpassed an already-impressive ancient legacy.
- 'by my mighty power and for the glory of my majesty'—there's a lot of 'I' and 'my' in Nebuchadnezzar's little speech to himself. Nebuchadnezzar speaks of his accomplishments as having been done by himself, for himself. He does not see that his power has been given him by God, for the sake of his subjects. In the aftermath of Nebuchadnezzar's dream, Daniel had recommended that he show his willingness to

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change by being kind to the lowly: it would demonstrate his humility under God and his goodwill toward his people. Instead, he spends twelve months become more and more puffed up by his sense of his own importance. Therefore, God turns him into one of the lowly people he has neglected.

- 'my honor and splendor were returned to me'—it's not that God doesn't want Nebuchadnezzar to succeed or prosper. As soon as Nebuchadnezzar recognizes and repents of his pride, greed, and self-congratulation, God freely heaps more blessing and power on him than he ever had before.
- 'Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and exalt and glorify the King of heaven'—over the course of his interactions with Daniel and his friends, Nebuchadnezzar progresses from being impressed by Daniel's supernatural ability, to defending the three friends' right to worship God, to enthusiastically worshipping God himself. Nebuchadnezzar's taste of God's dreadful ability to humble him produces tremendous awe and gratitude at the fact that God would much rather reward and empower him.

Taking it home:

- *For you and your family:* Daniel was able to deliver bad news to Nebuchadnezzar in such a way that Nebuchadnezzar was actually grateful for it. That can be a difficult thing to pull off. Are you anticipating—'dreading' might be the better word—having to tell someone something they may not want to hear? Consider praying about it. Ask God to give you the right words to say, and ask God to help you care for the person as well as possible in the circumstances.
- *For your six:* in this passage, God shows himself to be capable of being pretty frightening, in his power and in the ways he is willing to use it. He also shows himself to be quick to show mercy and abundant in generosity. Pray that your six would experience and recognize God's mercy and generosity in their lives. Pray that any fear of God they feel would lead them toward God, rather than away from him. And pray that they would be relieved of any unhelpful fear.
- *For our city, our country, or our world:* take a moment to pray for the universities of our city. They're among the best universities in the world, in many ways similar to Nebuchadnezzar's kingdom: capable of great good and of insufferable pride. Pray for our universities to reach their best potential of serving our city and the world.

Tuesday, September 18th

Daniel 5: 1-16

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

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

7 The king summoned the enchanters, astrologers and diviners. Then he said to these wise men of Babylon, "Whoever reads this writing and tells me what it means will be clothed in

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purple and have a gold chain placed around his neck, and he will be made the third highest ruler in the kingdom."

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

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

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

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

Points of Interest:

- 'King Belshazzar'—It's been more than 20 years since the previous chapter. Belshazzar is the son of Nabonidus, Nebuchadnezzar's successor and possibly his son (*New Bible Commentary* 753). Nabonidus is actually still ruling during this story, and Belshazzar is Nabonidus' co-regent or vice-regent; that's why, later in the story, Belshazzar offers Daniel third place in the kingdom: Nabonidus and Belshazzar are numbers one and two. The fact that Nebuchadnezzar is several times called Belshazzar's father refers to the fact that Belshazzar is Nebuchadnezzar's descendant and heir. In the context of royal dynasties, 'father' didn't always refer precisely to one's father; in fact, sometimes 'father' and 'son' were used to describe the relationship between predecessors and successors who weren't even related (*IVP Bible Background Commentary* 737).
- 'gave a great banquet'—this story takes place on the very last night of Nabonidus' and Belshazzar's reign. Even as Belshazzar parties, a Persian and Median army is making its way to Babylon. This party may be a last hurrah for Belshazzar, or it may be a flashy way of showing that he's still confident in a Babylonian victory.
- 'they brought in the gold goblets that had been taken from the temple of God'—whether out of youthful impudence, the need to go as far as possible to show how grand he is, or a desire to go out with style, Belshazzar decides to eat and drink off of the captured sacred articles. Furthermore, he worships the materials they are made out of, rather than the God in whose honor they were made. This is greater disrespect than Nebuchadnezzar showed even at his most pompous.

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- ‘a human hand appeared and wrote on the plaster of the wall’—this is where we get the phrase, ‘I can read the writing on the wall,’ meaning, ‘I can see the signs of impending doom.’ Belshazzar apparently couldn’t.
- ‘he was so frightened that his legs became weak’—whether he starts the evening trying to bolster his remaining confidence or trying to enjoy himself as much as he can before the end, this eerie detached hand and its mysterious message suck all of the life out of Belshazzar. Maybe he does, in fact, read the writing on the wall.
- ‘There is a man in your kingdom who has the spirit of the holy gods in him’—apparently, Daniel lost his high position and was almost completely forgotten in the change of administration from Nebuchadnezzar to Belshazzar. But the inscrutable divine message reminds the queen of—or gives the queen the opportunity to remind Belshazzar of—Daniel’s skill and wisdom.
- ‘You may keep your gifts for yourself’—a far cry from, ‘May the king live forever.’ Daniel shows Belshazzar none of the deference he had shown to Nebuchadnezzar. Maybe he’s gotten cranky in his old age, or he’s tired after a lifetime of dealing with posturing royalty. Maybe, being on his fourth king now, he recognizes just how ephemeral a king’s promises are. Maybe he simply doesn’t like Belshazzar. Or maybe he knows that Belshazzar is doomed and his promises empty. In any case, Daniel demonstrates that he doesn’t need anything from Belshazzar. Nonetheless, he is willing to give Belshazzar what he needs from Daniel: a message from God.

Taking it home:

- *For you and your family:* as I’ve mentioned a couple of times in the ‘Points of Interest’ section, it’s unclear to me whether Belshazzar is unaware of the trouble he is in or just ignoring it. What does seem clear is, either way, he is in some pretty deep denial of his true circumstances, and it makes the situation far worse. Ask God to protect you from making the same mistake. Pray that he would give you a clear perspective on your life—both the good and the bad—and the bravery to accept whatever you see.
- *For your six:* ask God to surround your six with people like the queen, who can be sources of hope and encouragement in their lives. Pray that God would equip you to be one of those people.
- *For our city, our country, or our world:* it strikes me as sad that Belshazzar couldn’t hear God for himself. He didn’t even know someone who could: he only knew someone who knew someone who could hear from God. That still seems true today. I think Daniel’s story portrays a God who really wants to hear from us and to talk to us; and yet all too often for all too many people, there’s a gap between us and God. Pray that God would remove the degrees of separation between himself and us. Pray for a wide pouring out of the Holy Spirit, such that it becomes more the norm to be in direct communication with God than not. Pray particularly that that would be happening in our city and soon.

Wednesday, September 19th

Daniel 5:17-31

18 "Your Majesty, the Most High God gave your father Nebuchadnezzar sovereignty and greatness and glory and splendor. 19 Because of the high position he gave him, all the nations and peoples of every language dreaded and feared him. Those the king wanted to put to death, he put to death; those he wanted to spare, he spared; those he wanted to promote, he promoted; and those he wanted to humble, he humbled. 20 But when his

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heart became arrogant and hardened with pride, he was deposed from his royal throne and stripped of his glory. 21 He was driven away from people and given the mind of an animal; he lived with the wild donkeys and ate grass like the ox; and his body was drenched with the dew of heaven, until he acknowledged that the Most High God is sovereign over the kingdoms on earth and sets over them anyone he wishes.

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

25 "This is the inscription that was written:
MENE, MENE, TEKEL, PARSIN

26 "This is what these words mean:
Mene: God has numbered the days of your reign and brought it to an end.

27 *Tekel*: You have been weighed on the scales and found wanting.

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

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

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

Points of Interest:

- 'you, Belshazzar, his son, have not humbled yourself, though you knew all this'—sadly, Belshazzar hasn't learned from Nebuchadnezzar's hard-won experience. And apparently it's not because Nebuchadnezzar failed to tell him. From the way Daniel talks about it, Belshazzar was around to see what happened to Nebuchadnezzar, or he's heard Nebuchadnezzar tell the story many times. I imagine that the lesson of humility is something Nebuchadnezzar tried very hard to pass on to his successors as he prepared them for leadership. Apparently, it's a lesson Belshazzar wasn't interested in learning. Maybe, in Belshazzar's administration, Daniel has not so much been forgotten as actively and purposefully ignored. It costs Belshazzar his kingdom.
- 'MENE, MENE, TEKEL, PARSIN'—on the surface, the words are roughly, 'Penny, Penny, Dime, Nickel,' but the riddle involves a little bit of wordplay and punning. Besides being the names of common coins, *mene* means 'count,' and *tekel* means 'weigh.' *Parsin* means 'portion,' but it also sounds like 'Persians' (*New Bible Commentary* 754). Altogether, it means something like, 'you've been weighed and measured, and sold in portions to the Persians.'
- 'Your kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and Persians'—the Medes were the Persians' junior partners. They were eventually more or less subsumed by them.
- 'at Belshazzar's command, Daniel was clothed in purple'—Belshazzar gives Daniel the promised—and unwanted—reward. Of course, in light of Daniel's message, the reward is practically meaningless. I can't decide whether Belshazzar's gesture here is pathetic or a moving moment of reclaimed dignity. I guess you would have to be there to know.

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- ‘Darius the Mede took over the kingdom’—scholars don’t agree on the identity of Darius the Mede. Some think he is the general who conquered Babylon and became a temporary military governor (*IVP Bible Background Commentary* 739), others that there was a short period of Median rule before the Persians more firmly took hold. Still others think that Darius the Mede is just another name for—go figure—Cyrus the Persian (*Illustrated Bible Dictionary* 364). We do know that Cyrus, the Persian emperor, became the ruler of Babylon right around this time. So, Darius was either subordinate to, quickly replaced by, or identical to Cyrus pretty much from the get-go.

Taking it home:

- *For you and your family:* it took Nebuchadnezzar much of his lifetime to learn the benefits of humility. It seems like he tried to pass this hard-won lesson on to his descendants; but, unfortunately, he was unsuccessful. What’s a valuable lesson you’ve learned in your life, one you’d like to pass on to the next generation without them having to learn it again the hard way? With whom would you like to share this wisdom you’ve gained? It might be your children, nephews and nieces, students, younger people at work, newer students at school—there’s definitely someone who could benefit from your experience. Pray that God would help you to pass it along, and that the next generation would have good ears to hear it.
- *For your six:* Pray the same thing for your six. Ask God to show them the wisdom they have gained, and to help them figure out how to pass it along to people who would benefit from it.
- *For our city, our country, or our world:* Often in political changeover, there’s a repudiation of the past administration. I imagine that sometimes that radical change is necessary, but I would also think that valuable lessons learned are often lost in the transition. Pray for our leaders, that they would have the wisdom to learn from their predecessors, even when those predecessors are political enemies.

Thursday, September 20th

Daniel 6: 1-14

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

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

10 Now when Daniel learned that the decree had been published, he went home to his upstairs room where the windows opened toward Jerusalem. Three times a day he got

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down on his knees and prayed, giving thanks to his God, just as he had done before. 11 Then these men went as a group and found Daniel praying and asking God for help. 12 So they went to the king and spoke to him about his royal decree: "Did you not publish a decree that during the next thirty days anyone who prays to any god or human being except to you, Your Majesty, would be thrown into the lions' den?"

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

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

Points of Interest:

- 'with three administrators over them, one of whom was Daniel'—with the Medes and Persians taking over for the Babylonians, we have another shake-up in the government. And Daniel once again finds himself on top. Just like when Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were suddenly promoted, Daniel's rise from obscurity to prominence provokes jealousy among the other political players.
- 'the administrators and the satraps tried to find grounds for charges'—apparently, sabotaging a political career by finding the skeletons in the closet has a long history. Unfortunately for the other administrators and satraps, the old stand-bys of corruption and sex don't seem to work on Daniel. He's squeaky clean. So, of course, they have to make up a scandal.
- 'except to you, Your Majesty'—the story of Daniel portrays these world leaders as being extraordinarily susceptible to flatter, and somehow I find it completely believable.
- 'put it in writing so that it cannot be altered'—at this point, wouldn't you start to get a little suspicious that you're being trapped? It's a lot like when someone says, 'Will you say yes to whatever I ask you next?' If I were Darius, I'd be saying, 'Wait just a second here. Let's back up for a minute.'
I would guess that the rule about not changing a law once it's written down would be intended either to display the ruler's infallibility—he never has to change his mind—or to bolster the law's reliability—once it's written down you can be sure it will be enforced. Regardless, it seems like a system that would cause plenty of its own problems. We'll see examples of the flaws of this particular legislative practice both here and in Esther.
- 'Now when Daniel learned that the decree had been published'—when Daniel hears that it's been made illegal to pray, the very first thing he does is pray about it. His dependence on God has brought him through an awful lot in his lifetime, and he's not about to be scared off from God by this latest crazy scheme of this latest king. In fact, that's exactly what Daniel's rivals depend on. It's quite a statement that even Daniel's enemies are utterly convinced of his faithfulness and integrity. And it seems a bit cruel and twisted that they would use it against him.
- 'When the king heard this, he was greatly distressed'—despite thinking that Darius has been pretty foolish in this passage, I can't help but like him. I feel for him as he faces the prospect of losing his best lieutenant, and I appreciate the genuine concern he shows toward Daniel. It's a refreshing change from the constant, blustery, 'Off with their heads!' of the young Nebuchadnezzar. Nonetheless, Darius ends up in a very similar position to Nebuchadnezzar: all-powerful, but totally helpless.

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- 'made every effort until sundown to save him'—I guess the only way to save Daniel would be to come up with a law that didn't neutralized his first law's effect without repealing it. But apparently he didn't leave himself a good loophole. There's nothing he can do.

Taking it home:

- *For you and your family:* just as you prayed for your six last week, today pray that God would rescue you from jealousy and its effects. Ask God to cleanse you of your own jealousy, and to protect you from the jealousy of others.
- *For your six:* pray that God would provide your six with shrewdness to see through schemes that play on their vanity or gullibility. Ask God to protect them from bad business deals, jobs, investment opportunities, diet plans, beauty products and more that are, in fact, too good to be true.
- *For our city, our country, or our world:* pray for people like Daniel—people of honesty and integrity and effectiveness—in our government. Pray that there would be more and more of them, that God would protect them from unjust attacks, and that they would find themselves promoted into places of influence.

Friday, September 21st

Daniel 6:15-28

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

25 Then King Darius wrote to all the nations and peoples of every language in all the earth:
"May you prosper greatly!"

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

"For he is the living God

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and he endures forever;
his kingdom will not be destroyed,
his dominion will never end.

27 He rescues and he saves;
he performs signs and wonders
in the heavens and on the earth.
He has rescued Daniel
from the power of the lions."

28 So Daniel prospered during the reign of Darius and the reign of Cyrus the Persian.

Points of Interest:

- 'no decree or edict that the king issues can be changed'—in other words, 'Stop stalling.'
- 'May your God, whom you serve continually, rescue you!'—Darius seems to respect Daniel's devotion to God, and even to hope that there's some chance that God will rescue Daniel. It leads me to ask, once again, 'Why would Darius write a law which would make Daniel choose between the king and God?'
There are, of course, many parallels between the fiery furnace story and the lion's den story: jealous counselors take advantage of the king's vanity to rid themselves of their rival, the king's favorite; the king's favorite is sent to certain, grisly death; God sends an angel to rescue the king's favorite. What's most noticeable to me about these stories, though, is the difference between the two kings. In the fiery furnace episode, Nebuchadnezzar himself sets things up as a power struggle between him and God. In this story, Darius is actually hoping that God is more powerful than him, so that God can undo the mistake he has made.
- 'he called to Daniel in an anguished voice'—it feels to me like Darius is riding the edge of hopefulness and despair.
- 'May the king live forever!'—Daniel's words simultaneously let us know that Daniel is alive and that he forgives Darius for condemning him to death.
- 'the men who had falsely accused Daniel'—their charge that Daniel had illegally prayed is, of course, true. But their deeper accusation is that Daniel is disloyal to the king. In that regard, Daniel is innocent and they are guilty. So, they share Daniel's sentence.
- 'the reign of Darius and the reign of Cyrus the Persian'—those who think that Darius and Cyrus are the same person translate this phrase, 'the reign of Darius, that is, the reign of Cyrus the Persian' (*Bible Background Commentary* 740). Not knowing Aramaic, I have no idea how tenable that translation is.
- 'his kingdom will not be destroyed'—The big lesson of Daniel's story is that God's kingdom is more powerful and enduring than any other kingdom. Jehoiakim's kingdom is destroyed in chapter one. Nebuchadnezzar's is at least disrupted in chapter four. Belshazzar's is destroyed in chapter five. But God's kingdom just keeps going. The existence and strength of God's kingship can be incredibly good news, even to these other kingdoms: God offers guidance, help, and even honor and prosperity to rulers who humbly admit their need of him and who use their power to help those who need it. These worldly rulers most decidedly need God's guidance and help: in and of themselves, they're too small to do their jobs well. Daniel learns the benefits of trusting in God and thrives during the rise and fall of all of these kingdoms. The big question the story of Daniel leaves us with is, Who will follow Daniel's example?

Daily Bible Guide—Daniel and Esther **Week 2**

Taking it home:

- *For you and your family:* I love the picture of totally undeserved grace we see in this story. While he had a little bit of help from his conniving counselors, Darius' predicament is largely of his own making. Nonetheless, God shows him mercy and gets him out of the situation more or less unscathed. Have you gotten yourself into trouble? Even if you don't deserve it, ask God to rescue you. If things turn out better than you hope, consider thanking God and telling someone else what happened to you, just as Darius does here.
- *For your six:* Are any of your six facing unjust accusations? Pray that God would vindicate them. Also pray that God would give them the ability to forgive their accusers, just as Daniel forgave Darius.
- *For our city, our country, or our world:* over the course of Daniel's story, we've seen good kings and bad kings, strong kings and weak kings, wise and foolish, humble and proud—and kings who are mixtures of it all. This survey of kingship shows us that God's kingdom is much, much better—more powerful, more beneficial, more enduring—than any other. Pray for God's kingdom to grow in our city, our country, and our world.

Saturday, September 22nd

Esther 1

1 This is what happened during the time of Xerxes, the Xerxes who ruled over 127 provinces stretching from India to Cush: 2 At that time King Xerxes reigned from his royal throne in the citadel of Susa, 3 and in the third year of his reign he gave a banquet for all his nobles and officials. The military leaders of Persia and Media, the princes, and the nobles of the provinces were present.

4 For a full 180 days he displayed the vast wealth of his kingdom and the splendor and glory of his majesty. 5 When these days were over, the king gave a banquet, lasting seven days, in the enclosed garden of the king's palace, for all the people from the least to the greatest who were in the citadel of Susa. 6 The garden had hangings of white and blue linen, fastened with cords of white linen and purple material to silver rings on marble pillars. There were couches of gold and silver on a mosaic pavement of porphyry, marble, mother-of-pearl and other costly stones. 7 Wine was served in goblets of gold, each one different from the other, and the royal wine was abundant, in keeping with the king's liberality. 8 By the king's command each guest was allowed to drink with no restrictions, for the king instructed all the wine stewards to serve each man what he wished.

9 Queen Vashti also gave a banquet for the women in the royal palace of King Xerxes.

10 On the seventh day, when King Xerxes was in high spirits from wine, he commanded the seven eunuchs who served him—Mehuman, Biztha, Harbona, Bigtha, Abagtha, Zethar and Karkas— 11 to bring before him Queen Vashti, wearing her royal crown, in order to display her beauty to the people and nobles, for she was lovely to look at. 12 But when the attendants delivered the king's command, Queen Vashti refused to come. Then the king became furious and burned with anger.

13 Since it was customary for the king to consult experts in matters of law and justice, he spoke with the wise men who understood the times 14 and were closest to the king—Karshena, Shethar, Admatha, Tarshish, Meres, Marsena and Memukan, the seven nobles of Persia and Media who had special access to the king and were highest in the kingdom.

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15 "According to law, what must be done to Queen Vashti?" he asked. "She has not obeyed the command of King Xerxes that the eunuchs have taken to her."

16 Then Memukan replied in the presence of the king and the nobles, "Queen Vashti has done wrong, not only against the king but also against all the nobles and the peoples of all the provinces of King Xerxes. 17 For the queen's conduct will become known to all the women, and so they will despise their husbands and say, 'King Xerxes commanded Queen Vashti to be brought before him, but she would not come.' 18 This very day the Persian and Median women of the nobility who have heard about the queen's conduct will respond to all the king's nobles in the same way. There will be no end of disrespect and discord.

19 "Therefore, if it pleases the king, let him issue a royal decree and let it be written in the laws of Persia and Media, which cannot be repealed, that Vashti is never again to enter the presence of King Xerxes. Also let the king give her royal position to someone else who is better than she. 20 Then when the king's edict is proclaimed throughout all his vast realm, all the women will respect their husbands, from the least to the greatest."

21 The king and his nobles were pleased with this advice, so the king did as Memukan proposed. 22 He sent dispatches to all parts of the kingdom, to each province in its own script and to each people in their own language, proclaiming that every man should be ruler over his own household, using his native tongue.

Points of Interest:

- 'during the time of Xerxes'—Xerxes was the grandson of Cyrus the Persian. The story of Esther takes place a little more than 50 years after the episode of Daniel and the lions' den.
- 'stretching from India to Cush'—Cush is modern-day Sudan. Xerxes' realm included what is now Egypt, the Sudan, the entire Middle East, Turkey, and parts of India and Pakistan.
- 'For a full 180 days he displayed the vast wealth of his kingdom'—yet another party to show just how rich and powerful a king is. All of the displays of wealth and power we saw in Daniel pale in comparison to this one, which lasts six months, has a one-week grand finale, includes rich and poor alike, and is unimaginably extravagant.
- 'the seven eunuchs who served him'—eunuchs were castrated servants. Despite their servant status, they could actually rise to the highest positions in the empire. They were considered more loyal and reliable because they couldn't be tempted to treachery by two of the biggest temptations facing royal officials: sex, and the chance to advance the fortunes of their own children.
- 'Queen Vashti refused to come'—it's perhaps no big surprise that Vashti wouldn't want to appear. After seven days of continuous drinking, her husband asks her to put on some sexy clothes and show herself in front of thousands of other drunken men so that he can say, with slurred speech no doubt, 'Isn't my wife hot?' As inappropriate as Xerxes' request is, it's dangerous for Vashti to refuse. What Xerxes intended as the crowning moment of his six-month 'Aren't I Wonderful?' festival becomes instead a humiliating display of him being shown up by his wife.
- 'According to law, what must be done to Queen Vashti?'—Xerxes asks, 'Has she broken any laws here for which we can punish her?' His advisors respond, 'No, but we can make one.'

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- ‘someone else who is better than she’—this reminds me an awful lot of your friends saying, ‘You’re too good for her anyway,’ when you’ve been dumped by your girlfriend. I wonder if they’re still drunk.
- ‘all the women will respect their husbands’—now I’m pretty certain that they’re still drunk. Either that, or very out of touch. How else could they possibly think that they could gain their wives’ respect by legally requiring it?
- ‘to each people in their own language’—rather than only in the official Aramaic, they make sure this particular law is published in every local dialect from the Sudan to Pakistan. They want it to be absolutely clear, by law, that the men are in charge.

Taking it home:

- *For you and your family:* while it’s easy to make fun of Xerxes and the frat boy atmosphere of his court, a moment’s reflection humbles me. I have to admit that I don’t respond terribly well when I’ve been embarrassed or things don’t go my way. I shudder to think what I’d do in situations like that if I had almost completely unchecked power and a crowd of flatterers egging me on in whatever decision I made. How do you respond when you don’t get your way? How would you like to respond? Ask God to help you be more of the person you would like to be.
- *For your six:* Pray for the marriages and dating relationships of your six, and for their relationships in general with the opposite gender. Pray for harmony, for mutual respect, and for mutual support and encouragement to characterize those relationships.
- *For our city, our country, or our world:* pray for the lawmakers of our country. Pray that by God’s grace they would use that power fairly. Pray that God would give them the strength to resist the temptation to use the laws to keep others down.

Sunday, September 23rd **Esther 2**

1 Later when King Xerxes' fury had subsided, he remembered Vashti and what she had done and what he had decreed about her. 2 Then the king's personal attendants proposed, "Let a search be made for beautiful young virgins for the king. 3 Let the king appoint commissioners in every province of his realm to bring all these beautiful young women into the harem at the citadel of Susa. Let them be placed under the care of Hegai, the king's eunuch, who is in charge of the women; and let beauty treatments be given to them. 4 Then let the young woman who pleases the king be queen instead of Vashti." This advice appealed to the king, and he followed it.

5 Now there was in the citadel of Susa a Jew of the tribe of Benjamin, named Mordecai son of Jair, the son of Shimei, the son of Kish, 6 who had been carried into exile from Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, among those taken captive with Jehoiachin king of Judah. 7 Mordecai had a cousin named Hadassah, whom he had brought up because she had neither father nor mother. This young woman, who was also known as Esther, had a lovely figure and was beautiful. Mordecai had taken her as his own daughter when her father and mother died.

8 When the king's order and edict had been proclaimed, many young women were brought to the citadel of Susa and put under the care of Hegai. Esther also was taken to the king's palace and entrusted to Hegai, who had charge of the harem. 9 She pleased him and won his favor. Immediately he provided her with her beauty treatments and special food. He assigned to her seven female attendants selected from the king's palace and moved her and her attendants into the best place in the harem.

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10 Esther had not revealed her nationality and family background, because Mordecai had forbidden her to do so. 11 Every day he walked back and forth near the courtyard of the harem to find out how Esther was and what was happening to her.

12 Before a young woman's turn came to go in to King Xerxes, she had to complete twelve months of beauty treatments prescribed for the women, six months with oil of myrrh and six with perfumes and cosmetics. 13 And this is how she would go to the king: Anything she wanted was given her to take with her from the harem to the king's palace. 14 In the evening she would go there and in the morning return to another part of the harem to the care of Shaashgaz, the king's eunuch who was in charge of the concubines. She would not return to the king unless he was pleased with her and summoned her by name.

15 When the turn came for Esther (the young woman Mordecai had adopted, the daughter of his uncle Abihail) to go to the king, she asked for nothing other than what Hegai, the king's eunuch who was in charge of the harem, suggested. And Esther won the favor of everyone who saw her. 16 She was taken to King Xerxes in the royal residence in the tenth month, the month of Tebeth, in the seventh year of his reign.

17 Now the king was attracted to Esther more than to any of the other women, and she won his favor and approval more than any of the other virgins. So he set a royal crown on her head and made her queen instead of Vashti. 18 And the king gave a great banquet, Esther's banquet, for all his nobles and officials. He proclaimed a holiday throughout the provinces and distributed gifts with royal liberality.

19 When the virgins were assembled a second time, Mordecai was sitting at the king's gate. 20 But Esther had kept secret her family background and nationality just as Mordecai had told her to do, for she continued to follow Mordecai's instructions as she had done when he was bringing her up.

21 During the time Mordecai was sitting at the king's gate, Bigthana and Teresh, two of the king's officers who guarded the doorway, became angry and conspired to assassinate King Xerxes. 22 But Mordecai found out about the plot and told Queen Esther, who in turn reported it to the king, giving credit to Mordecai. 23 And when the report was investigated and found to be true, the two officials were impaled on poles. All this was recorded in the book of the annals in the presence of the king.

Points of Interest:

- 'Let a search be made for beautiful young virgins for the king'—they form their national policy out of the advice the hero always gets from his stupid friends in teen romantic comedies: 'Dude, the only way to get over her is to find someone even hotter than her.'
- 'Hegai, the king's eunuch, who is in charge of the women'—since his job involved being continuously surrounded by the most beautiful women in the kingdom, the king felt it especially prudent to have the post of keeper of the harem filled by a eunuch.
- 'among those taken captive with Jehoiachin king of Judah'—Jehoiachin was Jehoikim's son. During his time, Nebuchadnezzar took even greater control over Jerusalem, bringing all of the remaining nobles, the whole middle class, and the king himself into captivity in Babylon (2 Kings 25:8-17).
The imprisonment of Jehoiachin happened about 100 years before the events of our story; so it must be his grandfather Kish, not Mordecai himself, who was captured with Jehoiachin (*IVP Bible Background Commentary* 486).

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- ‘because Mordecai had forbidden her to do so’—it’s not clear why Mordecai would want Esther to hide her Jewish identity. As far as we can tell, the Jews fared relatively well in the Persian Empire.
- ‘In the evening she would go there and in the morning return to another part of the harem’—the harem and the king have separate palaces, and in the harem there are separate areas for virgins and for women who have become the king’s concubines. So, the young woman moves quickly from the virgins’ area to the king’s palace to the concubines’ area on the momentous day of her audience with the king.
- ‘she asked for nothing other than what Hegai suggested’—I don’t know whether the young women tend to overdress themselves or they greedily try to take as much swag as they can with them to their new home. Regardless, under Hegai’s advice, Esther makes a simpler choice, and she attractively stands out from the others.
- ‘he set a royal crown on her head’—as we can see from the story, the king has quite a few women whose job it is to entertain him, and he keeps a pretty deep bench in case for any reason his concubines are unsatisfying. But he has only one person who fulfills the role of queen; that role is taken away from Vashti and given to Esther.
- ‘Mordecai found out about the plot and told Queen Esther’—through Esther, Mordecai now has fairly direct access to the king; so he’s able to make sure the necessary information gets to the king quickly enough to prevent the coup.

Taking it home:

- *For you and your family:* the loss of a relationship can be a lonely, difficult thing. To my mind, Xerxes tries to move past the pain a little too quickly and glibly, by simply immediately replacing Vashti. He doesn’t take the time to grieve the broken relationship, or to reflect on what he might learn from it. He doesn’t even really seem able to admit that he’s been hurt and that he misses Vashti. Are you facing the recent loss of an important relationship? It could be a romantic relationship that’s ended, or the loss of a loved one, or a friend who’s moved away. Ask God to help you avoid moving too quickly past the loss. Tell God how you feel and what you miss. Ask for his comfort. And ask for his guidance and his healing. God cares about your loss, does not want you abandoned in your loneliness, and has good plans for your future relationships.
- *For your six:* I’m sure it must have been somewhat unsettling for Esther to all of a sudden find herself thrown into the king’s strange beauty contest. But, with Mordecai’s help, good advice, and God’s help and favor, she navigates the unfamiliar and uncomfortable situation with poise. Are any of your six in an awkward or disorienting situation? Ask God to give them poise and an ability to think on their feet. Pray that the situation turns out better than they would imagine.
- *For our city, our country, or our world:* I don’t know if I’m just getting old, or if our tabloid media is getting worse, or if we’ve just hit a bad patch of extremely troubled pretty, young, famous women, but I’m getting the impression that—at least in the media—good models of feminine beauty are pretty hard to find right now. Pray for young women who are growing up with Britney, Lindsey, Paris, and Nicole constantly in the headlines. Pray that God would provide them with good mentors, good friends, and good advice and support from their families. Pray that they would have sharp eyes for true and false beauty, that God would protect them from foolish decisions made out of a desire to be attractive, and that they would grow into beautiful, confident, and well-adjusted women.

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