

# 21 Days of Faith 2007

## Daniel and Esther Daily Guide

By Brian Housman

### Introduction

#### Introducing the 21 Days of Faith Bible Guide

Every once in a while, we at the Greater Boston Vineyard conduct a little faith experiment we call the Days of Faith—often 40 Days, this time 21. You can learn more about the 21 Days of Faith in Dave Schmelzer's *User's Manual*, which you can usually find nearby wherever you picked up this guide. One element in the larger experience of the 21 Days is this three-week walk through two of the books of the Bible.

One of the things I really love about these Bible guides is that those of us who participate get the unique chance to study the Bible alone and together at the same time: the guides are designed to help each of us have a satisfying interaction with the Bible on our own each day; but because hundreds of other people are reading and thinking about the exact same daily Bible passage, it also gives us the fun opportunity to share our individual experience with the people around us. So, please join in yourself, share this guide with your friends, and talk together about what you find.

Whether you've never opened a Bible before in your life or you've been reading the Bible ever since you did memory verses as a kid, I've written this guide with you in mind. People of both varieties have told me that previous guides have been surprisingly helpful and interesting, occasionally thought-provoking, and not-too-infrequently relevant to their lives. Hopefully, at least the same can be said of this most recent installment in the series.

Each day's guide is broken into three sections:

1. **The story for the day.** We'll be reading the incredible stories of Daniel and Esther. I've divided their stories into 20 bite-size portions, meant to be short enough that you can comfortably read them in a single day, but long enough that each day is a satisfying stand-alone experience—the passages tend to be between half a page and a page long. For your convenience, I've included the Bible text of each day's story in *Today's New International Version* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005). I hope you'll find it to be a very readable translation, with current vocabulary and a modern sensibility. As you read the story, try to read it from the perspectives of the participants in it. Really get inside the story. What's it like to go through this experience with these people?
2. **Points of Interest.** This section briefly explores aspects of the day's story that might be especially interesting or potentially confusing. It offers some historical notes and references that might help to interpret the story, frames some of the issues or questions, and gives suggestions of ways to understand the story and its meaning.
3. **Taking it home.** In this section, I offer some suggestions for how the day's reading might apply practically to our lives and the lives of the people around us. Much of the time, I'll propose a way we might want to respond to the passage through prayer; other times, I

## ***Daily Bible Guide—Daniel and Esther***

### **Week 1**

might propose a little experiment, or a conversation. Each day, we'll look at the passage from the perspective of three groups of people:

- a. **For you and your family**—we'll explore how we and the people closest to us might identify with the story. We'll discuss implications that it has for how we look at ourselves, how we approach our lives, and how our family relates to God;
- b. **For 'your six'**—think of six people in your life who live locally, who aren't currently followers of God (but who may be interested in God or exploring issues of faith), and for whom you'd like to see God do good things. What does this passage have to offer to those six friends?
- c. **For our city, country, or world**—we'll spend some time each thinking about what the day's story might mean for the world, our nation, our society, or the cities of Boston and Cambridge.

**This guide will be available in written form each Sunday at the Greater Boston Vineyard. You can also read it in blog format at [21daysofffaith2007.bostonvineyard.org](http://21daysofffaith2007.bostonvineyard.org) or download it in PDF format from the 21 Days of Faith section of [bostonvineyard.org](http://bostonvineyard.org).**

#### **Introducing Daniel and Esther**

Daniel and Esther lived toward the end of a very tumultuous time. Egypt had long been the superpower in their corner of the world, but was going through a period of decline just as three new rivals—Assyria, Babylon, and Persia—started to gain strength. These four heavyweights spent about 200 years duking it out for supremacy. Judah—Daniel and Esther's homeland—was a tiny country which, to its great misfortune, happened to be located on the path the contenders' huge armies used to get to one another. Because of this inconvenient placement, Judah was often used as a pawn in the larger nations' strategies, a prize over which they fought, a convenient battleground for their wars, or simply a highway for advancing and retreating armies.

It was not just a political and economic disaster for the Jews (the residents of Judah), but a crisis of faith as well. The Jews tended to think of their city Jerusalem as the Center of the Universe, but they discovered that it was actually something of a small, backwater town in comparison to the cosmopolitan capitals of the giant empires that surrounded it. Furthermore, they had believed that their land could never be taken away and that Jerusalem could never be conquered, because the land was a special gift from God and the Jerusalem temple the unique dwelling place of God on earth; but here they were at the whim of these apparently godless nations. These catastrophes provoked profoundly unsettling spiritual questions:

- Had God abandoned them? Forgotten them? Ceased to care about them?
- Were the gods of these other nations actually stronger than the one they had always thought of as the only true God?
- How would they relate to God without a Temple or the Promised Land?
- Is worshipping God worth it?

The stories of Daniel and Esther can be seen as responses to these questions. I think what we'll find as we read them is that God cares more about and is more active in these other nations than the Jews would have ever imagined, but his interest in the Babylonians and the Persians

## ***Daily Bible Guide—Daniel and Esther***

### **Week 1**

doesn't come at the expense of the Jews; he still cares very much about them, and, in fact, has bigger plans for them than ever.

The books of Daniel and Esther are both found in the Bible's Old Testament, the part of the Bible written before Jesus' life and focused on the story of the Jews and their relationship with God. Daniel is found among the prophetic books, and Esther among the histories.

Daniel is remarkable among Old Testament books in that half of it—the second through seventh chapters—is written in Aramaic, while the other half is in the customary Hebrew. Since Aramaic was the common language of the Persian Empire, it's possible that the middle chapters were written in Aramaic for separate, wider distribution among the people of the empire (Baldwin 29-30); meanwhile, the beginning and end, which deal more specifically with Jewish concerns, were left in Hebrew, the Jews' local language. Daniel is also split into two halves another way: the first six chapters tell Daniel's story, and the second six chapters collect his dreams and visions. We'll be looking at the first half.

Esther is also fairly extraordinary among biblical books: God is never referred to directly in the entire book. Because of this fact, there had been some debate as to whether it should even be included in the Bible. In the end, because it tells such an important part of Jewish history, with such obvious signs of faith on the part of God's followers and faithfulness on the part of God, the people who collected the Old Testament writings decided it should be included. Not that my opinion matters, but I for one am glad they did.

### **Bibliography**

- Baldwin, Joyce G. *Daniel: An Introduction and Commentary*. Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries 21. D.J. Wiseman, ed. Downers Grove: IVP, 1978.
- Douglas, J.D., ed. *The Illustrated Bible Dictionary*. Downers Grove: IVP, 1998.
- Walton, John H., Victor H. Matthews and Mark W. Chavalas. *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament*. Downers Grove: IVP, 2000.
- Wenham, G.J., J.A. Motyer, D.A. Carson, and R.T. France, ed. *New Bible Commentary*. Downers Grove: IVP, 1994

## ***Daily Bible Guide—Daniel and Esther***

### **Week 1**

**Monday, September 10th**

#### **Daniel 1**

1 In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it. 2 And the Lord delivered Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand, along with some of the articles from the temple of God. These he carried off to the temple of his god in Babylonia and put in the treasure house of his god.

3 Then the king ordered Ashpenaz, chief of his court officials, to bring into the king's service some of the Israelites from the royal family and the nobility— 4 young men without any physical defect, handsome, showing aptitude for every kind of learning, well informed, quick to understand, and qualified to serve in the king's palace. He was to teach them the language and literature of the Babylonians. 5 The king assigned them a daily amount of food and wine from the king's table. They were to be trained for three years, and after that they were to enter the king's service.

6 Among those who were chosen were some from Judah: Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah. 7 The chief official gave them new names: to Daniel, the name Belteshazzar; to Hananiah, Shadrach; to Mishael, Meshach; and to Azariah, Abednego.

8 But Daniel resolved not to defile himself with the royal food and wine, and he asked the chief official for permission not to defile himself this way. 9 Now God had caused the official to show favor and compassion to Daniel, 10 but the official told Daniel, "I am afraid of my lord the king, who has assigned your food and drink. Why should he see you looking worse than the other young men your age? The king would then have my head because of you."

11 Daniel then said to the guard whom the chief official had appointed over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah, 12 "Please test your servants for ten days: Give us nothing but vegetables to eat and water to drink. 13 Then compare our appearance with that of the young men who eat the royal food, and treat your servants in accordance with what you see." 14 So he agreed to this and tested them for ten days.

15 At the end of the ten days they looked healthier and better nourished than any of the young men who ate the royal food. 16 So the guard took away their choice food and the wine they were to drink and gave them vegetables instead.

17 To these four young men God gave knowledge and understanding of all kinds of literature and learning. And Daniel could understand visions and dreams of all kinds.

18 At the end of the time set by the king to bring them into his service, the chief official presented them to Nebuchadnezzar. 19 The king talked with them, and he found none equal to Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah; so they entered the king's service. 20 In every matter of wisdom and understanding about which the king questioned them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and enchanters in his whole kingdom.

21 And Daniel remained there until the first year of King Cyrus.

#### **Points of Interest:**

- 'Jehoiakim king of Judah'—Jehoiakim was an Egyptian puppet king who was siphoning off to Egypt as much of Judah's wealth as possible. When it became clear that—even with all of Judah's money—Egypt was losing to Babylon, Jehoiakim switched sides. Then a few years later, he switched back again. The Babylonians, understandably, became somewhat annoyed with Jehoiakim and had to send an army to bring him into line—more than once. Jehoiakim's story is found in 2 Kings 23:34-24:8.

## **Daily Bible Guide—Daniel and Esther**

### **Week 1**

- ‘Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon’—he actually became king at the end of this campaign against Jerusalem (*Illustrated Bible Dictionary* 1064) and ruled from 605 to 562 BC. Babylonia was located in what is now southern Iraq, the capital city of Babylon not far from modern-day Baghdad.
- ‘the Lord delivered Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand’—the defeat of Jehoiakim isn’t a failure on God’s part; it’s actually God’s idea. Interestingly, the author decides not to explain here why God would allow his special people to be conquered by a foreign enemy. Instead, in the rest of the story, he goes on to describe the surprising results of this action. Before we move on to those surprises, though, it’s worth noting that the people of Judah were given plenty of chances to avoid this tragedy. The prophet Jeremiah, writing in Jerusalem at this same time, talks of the fact that he had spent 23 years (and other prophets had spent hundreds of years) warning the people of Judah not to abandon God, not to worship other gods, and not to mistreat one another. But they didn’t listen:

8 Therefore the LORD Almighty says this: "Because you have not listened to my words, 9 I will summon all the peoples of the north and my servant Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon," declares the LORD, "and I will bring them against this land and its inhabitants and against all the surrounding nations (Jeremiah 25:8-9)

We might see this as a harsh—perhaps unduly harsh—reaction on God’s part, but it might be helpful to know that God is not acting impetuously here (there have been many warnings over a long period of time), and that he doesn’t see it as an ultimate rejection of his people. It’s a temporary punishment, for the sake of disciplining his wayward and misbehaving followers. Incidentally, later on, Daniel himself studies Jeremiah 25; you can read his response in chapter 9—unfortunately, we won’t make it that far together in our guide.

- ‘These he carried off to the temple of his god in Babylonia’—it was common practice to bring the idols of captured people to your own god’s temple (*Bible Background Commentary* 730). Bringing back the idols was more than just taking another nation’s valuable treasure (although it was that); it was demonstrating that your gods had taken their gods as prisoners. Since there wasn’t an idol of God in the Jewish temple, the Babylonians had to settle for taking away the various items used in the temple’s worship ceremonies. Not surprisingly, Nebuchadnezzar doesn’t see himself as God’s servant—to use Jeremiah’s phrase—in this matter. He sees his victory as a total defeat of the Jews and their god: he had taken God’s furniture and his dinnerware right out of God’s house, and there was nothing God could do about it.
- ‘to bring into the king’s service some of the Israelites from the royal family and the nobility’—these young men would essentially be hostages, making it less likely that their families would revolt. Being in Babylon would also limit their own ability to participate in a rebellion. But it seems like what is most important to Nebuchadnezzar is recruiting these talented young people to work for him; he would need as many capable people as he could find to work in the ever-growing administration of his fast-growing empire.
- ‘the language and literature of the Babylonians’—this would be a combination of language-learning, acculturation, and training in the necessary skills. It’s like their being sent to West Point or the Naval Academy, except that they’re being taught things like diplomacy, statecraft, and public administration.
- ‘a daily amount of food and wine from the king’s table’—free room and board is one of the perks of participating in this program. Apparently, from the rest of the story, the food was considered to be pretty good.

## ***Daily Bible Guide—Daniel and Esther***

### **Week 1**

- ‘The chief official gave them new names’—this could have been an attempt to give them new, Babylonian identities, or it could just be because the Hebrew names were difficult for him to pronounce (Baldwin 81).
- ‘not to defile himself with the royal food and wine’—it’s not totally clear why Daniel considers the food to be a defilement. The simplest explanation would be that it wasn’t kosher; however, that really only explains his aversion to the meat, not the wine. Maybe Daniel feels that it’s inappropriate to essentially party every day with the king who just defeated his people and captured him. Daniel is willing to be trained to work for the king. He doesn’t even balk at having his name changed. But the daily banquets are a bit much; so he requests simpler meals, more appropriate to someone who is still grieving his defeat and capture. If this is indeed Daniel’s motivation, it might help explain why the chief official is so reluctant to approve of the change in diet: it comes uncomfortably close to allowing disloyalty to the king. I’m sure a large part of the chief official’s job is fostering loyalty among these new ‘recruits’ and weeding out people who might be troublemakers. Since he likes Daniel and his friends, he doesn’t want to mark them as suspicious characters, nor does he want to do anything that will attract the king’s unfriendly notice of Daniel or him.
- ‘to the guard whom the chief official had appointed’—in the face of the chief official’s reluctance, Daniel cuts a side deal with the guard who serves them their food. This time around, Daniel first suggests a short-term experiment, lowering the stakes a little. I don’t know whether the experiment works because God supernaturally supplements Daniel and friends’ austere diet, because eating lots of rich food and drinking lots of wine is less healthy than the chief official thinks it is, or both. Anyway, Daniel and friends are allowed to continue on their vegetable diet.
- ‘To these four young men God gave knowledge and understanding’—the same God who sent them into captivity now turns around and shows his good intentions toward them in fairly substantial ways: he somehow helps their reputation with the chief official; he apparently blesses their vegetable diet experiment; and he supernaturally gives them greater abilities than anyone else in their training program. You have to wonder what God is up to.
- ‘And Daniel remained there until the first year of King Cyrus’—verses seventeen through twenty-one are a summary of the story that follows. Daniel’s career lasts almost seventy years, from the first year of Nebuchadnezzar (605 BC) to the first year of Cyrus (538 BC). The author very subtly tells us here that Daniel outlasts the Babylonian empire. Cyrus was the Persian king who defeated the Babylonians and kicked off about 300 years of Persian supremacy. So, Daniel’s career lasts from Babylon’s defeat of Egypt to Persia’s defeat of Babylon.

#### **Taking it home:**

- *For you and your family:* Daniel allowed his name to be changed, and he accepted the fact that he would be working for the king; but he decided that he couldn’t eat the king’s food. It can sometimes be difficult to know which compromises are acceptable and which ones we can’t make in good conscience. Particularly if you or your family members are currently facing any difficult decisions, take a moment to ask God for wisdom about where there is room for negotiation and where you have to stand firm. After you ask, briefly reflect to see if anything’s been made clearer for you.
- *For your six:* are any of your six dealing with a crisis or a tragedy? Ask God to be with them: to demonstrate that he sees them, he understands their suffering, and that he has

## ***Daily Bible Guide—Daniel and Esther***

### **Week 1**

good intentions toward them. When God is with us, even when things are difficult, it doesn't necessarily explain those difficult circumstances; but it does often make them more bearable.

- *For our city, country, or world:* in our city, this month is the time when many new people arrive in town, to attend school or to start a new job. They haven't been carried here as hostages like Daniel and his friends, but they are experiencing the disorientation of being in a strange, new place. Pray for these people, that their transition would go well. If you're someone who's been around here for a while, try to be friendly to these newcomers—or at least inwardly welcome them. We have a steady stream of new people, and it's sometimes difficult to maintain an open heart toward yet another batch. But, who knows, maybe one of these newcomers will be a source of good things in your life.

#### **Tuesday, September 11th**

##### **Daniel 2:1-13**

1 In the second year of his reign, Nebuchadnezzar had dreams; his mind was troubled and he could not sleep. 2 So the king summoned the magicians, enchanter, sorcerers and astrologers to tell him what he had dreamed. When they came in and stood before the king, 3 he said to them, "I have had a dream that troubles me and I want to know what it means."

4 Then the astrologers answered the king, "May the king live forever! Tell your servants the dream, and we will interpret it."

5 The king replied to the astrologers, "This is what I have firmly decided: If you do not tell me what my dream was and interpret it, I will have you cut into pieces and your houses turned into piles of rubble. 6 But if you tell me the dream and explain it, you will receive from me gifts and rewards and great honor. So tell me the dream and interpret it for me."

7 Once more they replied, "Let the king tell his servants the dream, and we will interpret it."

8 Then the king answered, "I am certain that you are trying to gain time, because you realize that this is what I have firmly decided: 9 If you do not tell me the dream, there is only one penalty for you. You have conspired to tell me misleading and wicked things, hoping the situation will change. So then, tell me the dream, and I will know that you can interpret it for me."

10 The astrologers answered the king, "There is not a person on earth who can do what the king asks! No king, however great and mighty, has ever asked such a thing of any magician or enchanter or astrologer. 11 What the king asks is too difficult. No one can reveal it to the king except the gods, and they do not live among human beings."

12 This made the king so angry and furious that he ordered the execution of all the wise men of Babylon. 13 So the decree was issued to put the wise men to death, and men were sent to look for Daniel and his friends to put them to death.

##### **Points of Interest:**

- 'his mind was troubled and he could not sleep'—we've probably all had the experience of being awakened by a dream that seems more intense and somehow more important than usual. If it's disturbing enough, we might wake a roommate, a spouse, or a parent to tell them about it; or maybe the next day we'll tell a friend, 'I had the strangest dream last night . . .' When Nebuchadnezzar has a disturbing dream, it's a matter of national security; so he gets his counselors out of bed to help him figure out what it means.

## ***Daily Bible Guide—Daniel and Esther***

### **Week 1**

- ‘Tell your servants the dream, and we will interpret it’—preceding Carl Jung by more than two millennia, the magicians of Babylon had developed catalogs of common dream imagery and its likely interpretation (*IVP Bible Background Commentary* 732).
- ‘tell me the dream and interpret it for me’—the king makes things significantly more interesting by suggesting that the magicians also tell him what his dream was. They can’t, of course, find that in their catalogs. For whatever reason, the usual way of doing things doesn’t suffice for the king with this particular dream. It’s not enough for him to know what a dream like this usually means. Instead, he wants to know what his particular dream means, and he wants to be sure that the interpretation is correct. He wants some proof that the interpretation comes supernaturally, and the best way he can think of assuring himself that the interpretation is supernatural is by requiring that they also discover the dream supernaturally. While not quite reasonable, the king’s requirement does make a certain amount of sense. It puts the magicians in quite a predicament, though.
- ‘You have conspired to tell me misleading and wicked things’—Nebuchadnezzar starts to sound a little paranoid here. Maybe the disturbing dream has him on edge, or maybe there was some palace intrigue going on that contributes to the king’s disturbed state of mind.
- ‘What the king asks is too difficult’—the magicians understandably become more and more frantic, but their desperation doesn’t mix well with the king’s agitation.
- ‘so angry and furious that he ordered the execution of all the wise men of Babylon’—he is basically saying, ‘If you can’t do this, I might as well just get rid of you. His rash decision to cut short so many lives displays Nebuchadnezzar’s utter self-centeredness, his absolute power, and the anxious helplessness he feels even with all that power.
- ‘men were sent to look for Daniel and his friends to put them to death’—Daniel and his friends are still in training; so they aren’t consulted on the dream interpretation. Nonetheless, the execution order applies to them as well. Bummer.

#### **Taking it home:**

- *For you and your family:* as a family, or with your roommates, or just with a group of friends, try paying attention to your dreams this week. People often find that keeping a little notepad by your bed and jotting them down when you wake up makes it easier to remember them. Share your dreams with one another. Do any of them seem more important than the others? If so, ask God to tell you what they mean.
- *For your six:* Nebuchadnezzar was unsatisfied with the same old dream interpretations; he needed something new. Do any of your six need some advice, and the conventional wisdom just isn’t working for them? Ask God to give them new insight from a different direction.
- *For our city, country, or world:* being a mayor, or a governor, or a president is a difficult, stressful job. Pray for peace for our government officials, particularly for peaceful rest. And pray that when their rest is disturbed, it’s an agitation that quickly leads to something productive.

#### **Wednesday, September 12th**

##### **Daniel 2: 14-28**

14 When Arioch, the commander of the king's guard, had gone out to put to death the wise men of Babylon, Daniel spoke to him with wisdom and tact. 15 He asked the king's officer, "Why did the king issue such a harsh decree?" Arioch then explained the matter to Daniel. 16

## ***Daily Bible Guide—Daniel and Esther***

### **Week 1**

At this, Daniel went in to the king and asked for time, so that he might interpret the dream for him.

17 Then Daniel returned to his house and explained the matter to his friends Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah. 18 He urged them to plead for mercy from the God of heaven concerning this mystery, so that he and his friends might not be executed with the rest of the wise men of Babylon. 19 During the night the mystery was revealed to Daniel in a vision. Then Daniel praised the God of heaven 20 and said:

"Praise be to the name of God for ever and ever;  
wisdom and power are his.

21 He changes times and seasons;  
he deposes kings and raises up others.  
He gives wisdom to the wise  
and knowledge to the discerning.

22 He reveals deep and hidden things;  
he knows what lies in darkness,  
and light dwells with him.

23 I thank and praise you, God of my ancestors:  
You have given me wisdom and power,  
you have made known to me what we asked of you,  
you have made known to us the dream of the king."

24 Then Daniel went to Arioch, whom the king had appointed to execute the wise men of Babylon, and said to him, "Do not execute the wise men of Babylon. Take me to the king, and I will interpret his dream for him."

25 Arioch took Daniel to the king at once and said, "I have found a man among the exiles from Judah who can tell the king what his dream means."

26 The king asked Daniel (also called Belteshazzar), "Are you able to tell me what I saw in my dream and interpret it?"

27 Daniel replied, "No wise man, enchanter, magician or diviner can explain to the king the mystery he has asked about, 28 but there is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries. He has shown King Nebuchadnezzar what will happen in days to come. Your dream and the visions that passed through your mind as you were lying in bed are these:

#### **Points of Interest:**

- 'Daniel went in to the king and asked for time'—it's like saying, 'If you just give me a few minutes, I'll grow ten feet tall.' Daniel is asking for a little more time to do the impossible. The fact that the king gives him the extra time shows that he's not simply irrationally taking out his anger on the magicians; he really wants to know what the dream means.
- 'He urged them to plead for mercy from the God of heaven'—I'd be interested to know what the spiritual life of these four young men was like before they were taken to Babylon. Had they been people of faith all along, even while the rest of their nation walked away from God? Or is the faith they show here something new to their life in Babylon? It's interesting either way. It's intriguing to think that being carried to Babylon brings them closer to God. On the other hand, if they've been people of faith all along, they've most likely prayed for God's mercy before, only to see their country conquered and their own lives hijacked; yet, here they are, praying for mercy again, seemingly expectant that God

## ***Daily Bible Guide—Daniel and Esther***

### **Week 1**

will answer. Either way, I guess I'd expect a lot more, 'Why me, God?' from them than we see. Instead, the more trouble they find themselves in, the more they put their trust in God—and he comes through for them.

- 'he deposes kings and raises up others'—recently, Jehoiakim was stripped of power while Nebuchadnezzar was raised up. Daniel sees very clearly now that God is the one behind these changes in the political landscape; we'll read tomorrow that that is what Nebuchadnezzar's dream is about. To take it a little further, though, king Nebuchadnezzar himself is—while not deposed—brought low and Daniel is raised up, by a dream. Nebuchadnezzar can't sleep, he is troubled, and he rashly decides to eliminate an entire branch of his government because he can't understand his dream. By God's grace, Daniel has something that the great king Nebuchadnezzar does not: 'you have given me wisdom and power.'
- 'I have found a man'—I would think that Arioch's attempt to claim the credit would fall a little flat, since he'd already sent Daniel in alone earlier. When the king was angry, Arioch stayed away. Now that the king's wish is granted, he's the first one in the door to tell him the good news. Smart, perhaps, but not very brave—and pretty obvious.

#### **Taking it home:**

- *For you and your family:* by God's help, Daniel was able to do the impossible. Daniel needed supernatural help, he asked for it, and he got it. If you find yourself in an impossible—or even just a difficult—situation today, ask for God's help, and see what happens.
- *For your six:* it must have been quite a comfort to Daniel to know that he could turn to Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. Pray for your six, that they would be surrounded by the support of good friends.
- *For our city, or country, or our world:* Daniel is so excited when God reveals the dream to him that he breaks out in song. I'm sure that relief at not being executed is part of it, but it seems to me that he's also genuinely excited about his discovery that there's a powerful and loving who God actually talks to people. Pray that many people in our city would have a similarly exciting connection with a living God. Don't hesitate to ask on your own behalf if it's something you want and haven't yet experienced.

#### **Thursday, September 13th**

##### **Daniel 2:29-48**

29 "As Your Majesty was lying there, your mind turned to things to come, and the revealer of mysteries showed you what is going to happen. 30 As for me, this mystery has been revealed to me, not because I have greater wisdom than anyone else alive, but so that Your Majesty may know the interpretation and that you may understand what went through your mind.

31 "Your Majesty looked, and there before you stood a large statue—an enormous, dazzling statue, awesome in appearance. 32 The head of the statue was made of pure gold, its chest and arms of silver, its belly and thighs of bronze, 33 its legs of iron, its feet partly of iron and partly of baked clay. 34 While you were watching, a rock was cut out, but not by human hands. It struck the statue on its feet of iron and clay and smashed them. 35 Then the iron, the clay, the bronze, the silver and the gold were all broken to pieces and became like chaff on a threshing floor in the summer. The wind swept them away without leaving a trace. But the rock that struck the statue became a huge mountain and filled the whole earth.

36 "This was the dream, and now we will interpret it to the king. 37 Your Majesty, you are the king of kings. The God of heaven has given you dominion and power and might and glory; 38

## ***Daily Bible Guide—Daniel and Esther***

### **Week 1**

in your hands he has placed all people everywhere and the beasts of the field and the birds in the sky. Wherever they live, he has made you ruler over them all. You are that head of gold.

39 "After you, another kingdom will arise, inferior to yours. Next, a third kingdom, one of bronze, will rule over the whole earth. 40 Finally, there will be a fourth kingdom, strong as iron—for iron breaks and smashes everything—and as iron breaks things to pieces, so it will crush and break all the others. 41 Just as you saw that the feet and toes were partly of baked clay and partly of iron, so this will be a divided kingdom; yet it will have some of the strength of iron in it, even as you saw iron mixed with clay. 42 As the toes were partly iron and partly clay, so this kingdom will be partly strong and partly brittle. 43 And just as you saw the iron mixed with baked clay, so the people will be a mixture and will not remain united, any more than iron mixes with clay.

44 "In the time of those kings, the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed, nor will it be left to another people. It will crush all those kingdoms and bring them to an end, but it will itself endure forever. 45 This is the meaning of the vision of the rock cut out of a mountain, but not by human hands—a rock that broke the iron, the bronze, the clay, the silver and the gold to pieces.

"The great God has shown the king what will take place in the future. The dream is true and its interpretation is trustworthy."

46 Then King Nebuchadnezzar fell prostrate before Daniel and paid him honor and ordered that an offering and incense be presented to him. 47 The king said to Daniel, "Surely your God is the God of gods and the Lord of kings and a revealer of mysteries, for you were able to reveal this mystery."

48 Then the king placed Daniel in a high position and lavished many gifts on him. He made him ruler over the entire province of Babylon and placed him in charge of all its wise men. 49 Moreover, at Daniel's request the king appointed Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego administrators over the province of Babylon, while Daniel himself remained at the royal court.

#### **Points of Interest:**

- 'so that Your Majesty may know the interpretation'—Daniel seems to go out of his way to stress that he isn't all that special. It's God's message for Nebuchadnezzar that's important, not the deliverer of it.
- 'like chaff on a threshing floor in the summer'—chaff is the husk that surrounds a kernel of grain. The grain was separated from the chaff on a threshing floor, and then the wind would blow the lighter chaff away, leaving only the grain. The gigantic statue becomes as inconsequential as sawdust, dispersed by a light breeze.
- 'You are that head of gold'—that must feel pretty good. On the other hand, even the golden head of this dream statue ends up disappearing without a trace.
- 'After you, another kingdom will arise, inferior to yours'—there are several ideas about the identities of these four kingdoms. Many people think it's the Babylonians, the Medes, the Persians, and the Greeks, since these are the four kingdoms Daniel and Nebuchadnezzar would have known about. Others think that Babylon, Persia, Greece, and Rome fit better. It could be Babylon, China, Great Britain, and the US and Soviet Union for all we know, since Daniel only reveals the first kingdom. While the exact identities of the four kingdoms is a mystery, the meaning of the dream is not:

## **Daily Bible Guide—Daniel and Esther**

### **Week 1**

- No matter how strong or beautiful one of these world empires appears, it's in many ways just a shallow imitation of something we've already seen before, and it's destined to be replaced sooner or later;
- Taken all together, these empires form an imposing picture. The worldly power they represent is enormous, costly, and impressive. But it's also flawed and brittle.
- 'in your hands he has placed all people everywhere'—a little bit of hyperbole here. Nebuchadnezzar did not, of course, rule Korea, or Ireland, or Mexico, or the Polynesian Islands. There were even people Daniel knew about, like the Greeks and the Cushites, who weren't under Babylonian rule. Nebuchadnezzar was, though, the ruler of an unprecedented number of different nations and people groups.
- 'the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed'—while the world empires are represented by an awesome statue made of precious metals, God's kingdom is a plain and blunt rock. But God's kingdom grows and endures while the world empires are replaced by one another and eventually fade away altogether.
- 'King Nebuchadnezzar fell prostrate before Daniel and paid him honor'—even Nebuchadnezzar recognizes that, in this moment at least, Daniel is greater than him.
- 'Surely your God is the God of gods and the Lord of kings'—Nebuchadnezzar is oddly grateful for a dream about how ephemeral his power is. Maybe this is what Nebuchadnezzar needed to know all along. He rules a huge empire, but he's really just a man who has a hard time sleeping. His job is far too big for him. He seems to be very comforted rather than dismayed by the fact that there is a god out there with more knowledge and power than him, to whom he can turn when he needs help.
- 'ruler over the entire province of Babylon and placed him in charge of all its wise men'—the empire was divided into several administrative provinces. Daniel is put in charge of the wise men for the most important of those provinces, Babylon itself.
- 'while Daniel himself remained at the royal court'—Daniel suggests an alteration of Nebuchadnezzar's plan. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego are put in charge of the wise men in Babylon, while Daniel becomes a special counselor to the king. I think it's more or less like Daniel is working in the White House, while Shadrach, Meshach, and Adednego are state governors.

#### **Taking it home:**

- *For you and your family:* God wants to work through you. He has good things in store for the world, and for the people around you; and he wants to use you to help him deliver those good things. Does that sound attractive to you? Let God know, and be on the lookout for ways you can be used by him.
- *For your six:* pray that your six would be surprised by the gift of unexpected favor at work, or at school, or in some other way today.
- *For our city, country, or world:* we live in the most powerful nation the world has ever seen, but it strikes me that Nebuchadnezzar's dream really is true: we're not all that unique, and our power won't last forever. Pray that God would give us the humility to see our real place in the world and under him.

#### **Friday, September 14th**

##### **Daniel 3:1-12**

1 King Nebuchadnezzar made an image of gold, sixty cubits high and six cubits wide, and set it up on the plain of Dura in the province of Babylon. 2 He then summoned the satraps, prefects, governors, advisers, treasurers, judges, magistrates and all the other provincial officials to come

## ***Daily Bible Guide—Daniel and Esther***

### **Week 1**

to the dedication of the image he had set up. 3 So the satraps, prefects, governors, advisers, treasurers, judges, magistrates and all the other provincial officials assembled for the dedication of the image that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up, and they stood before it.

4 Then the herald loudly proclaimed, "Nations and peoples of every language, this is what you are commanded to do: 5 As soon as you hear the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipe and all kinds of music, you must fall down and worship the image of gold that King Nebuchadnezzar has set up. 6 Whoever does not fall down and worship will immediately be thrown into a blazing furnace."

7 Therefore, as soon as they heard the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp and all kinds of music, all the nations and peoples of every language fell down and worshiped the image of gold that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up.

8 At this time some astrologers came forward and denounced the Jews. 9 They said to King Nebuchadnezzar, "May the king live forever! 10 Your Majesty has issued a decree that everyone who hears the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipe and all kinds of music must fall down and worship the image of gold, 11 and that whoever does not fall down and worship will be thrown into a blazing furnace. 12 But there are some Jews whom you have set over the affairs of the province of Babylon—Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego—who pay no attention to you, Your Majesty. They neither serve your gods nor worship the image of gold you have set up."

#### **Points of Interest:**

- 'King Nebuchadnezzar made an image of gold'—Nebuchadnezzar's humility in the aftermath of his dream doesn't last long. It's soon replaced with, 'For some reason, great, big golden sculptures have been on my mind recently. Why don't we build one?' It could be intended as a new image of Nebuchadnezzar's god, a memorial to his reign, or even a symbol of his own deification—all of those options are much the same anyway. You'll notice that while in Nebuchadnezzar's dream he was represented by a golden head only, here he's an entire golden sculpture.
- 'sixty cubits high and six cubits wide'—it's massive: ninety feet tall and nine feet wide. There's no way of knowing this, but I would suspect that something so large would be gold leaf, not solid gold.
- 'satraps, prefects, governors, advisers, treasurers, judges, magistrates'—these are the high government officials, listed in decreasing order of rank. I think that this list, along with the list of musical instruments, is repeated so many times in this passage and the next in order to give an impression of—and in order to poke some fun at—the overwhelming pomposity of the occasion. Imagine brass bands, gaudy uniforms with golden epaulets and countless medals, and Air Force fly-bys.
- 'some astrologers came forward and denounced the Jews'—they're probably jealous of the fact that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were taken right out of college and promoted over them. On the other hand, without Shadrach, Meshach, Abednego, and Daniel, they would all be dead. You'd think that would buy some gratitude, but apparently political infighting knows no bounds.  
It's unclear why Daniel is not also mentioned here. It's hard to imagine that, having refused to eat the king's food, he would bow to the king's golden image. Maybe he's away on business. Or maybe, being in a different government agency, he's simply not the target of the astrologers' attack.

## ***Daily Bible Guide—Daniel and Esther***

### **Week 1**

- 'They neither serve your gods nor worship the image of gold you have set up'—of course they don't. They serve the God Nebuchadnezzar himself had just called the God of gods and the Lord of kings. Why would they worship this upstart golden sculpture?

#### **Taking it home:**

- *For you and your family:* Nebuchadnezzar receives a dream from God about how fleeting his power and authority really are, and then he turns around and builds a monstrous golden statue to commemorate his achievements. We can sometimes be a little slow on the uptake. Ask God if there is any lesson you're having a hard time learning, and then try listening to hear if he has any answer for you. It may be a sentence or word that comes to mind, or even just an idea or impression. Ask God for patience, and for an ability to really embrace the advice he's trying to give you.
- *For your six:* ask God to rescue your six from the destructive power of jealousy, whether it is their own jealousy or jealousy directed at them.
- *For our city, country, or world:* it's a terrible thing when people in power use that power to compete with one another, rather than using it to serve their country. We're seeing many of the effects of such competition in Washington right now. Pray that God would do something to move Congress and the White House beyond the deadlock that has come with political in-fighting.

#### **Saturday, September 15th**

##### **Daniel 3:13-30**

13 Furious with rage, Nebuchadnezzar summoned Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. So these men were brought before the king, 14 and Nebuchadnezzar said to them, "Is it true, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, that you do not serve my gods or worship the image of gold I have set up? 15 Now when you hear the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipe and all kinds of music, if you are ready to fall down and worship the image I made, very good. But if you do not worship it, you will be thrown immediately into a blazing furnace. Then what god will be able to rescue you from my hand?"

16 Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego replied to him, "King Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. 17 If the God we serve is able to deliver us, then he will deliver us from the blazing furnace and from Your Majesty's hand. 18 But even if he does not, we want you to know, Your Majesty, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up."

19 Then Nebuchadnezzar was furious with Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, and his attitude toward them changed. He ordered the furnace heated seven times hotter than usual 20 and commanded some of the strongest soldiers in his army to tie up Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego and throw them into the blazing furnace. 21 So these men, wearing their robes, trousers, turbans and other clothes, were bound and thrown into the blazing furnace. 22 The king's command was so urgent and the furnace so hot that the flames of the fire killed the soldiers who took up Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, 23 and these three men, firmly tied, fell into the blazing furnace.

24 Then King Nebuchadnezzar leaped to his feet in amazement and asked his advisers, "Weren't there three men that we tied up and threw into the fire?"

They replied, "Certainly, Your Majesty."

## ***Daily Bible Guide—Daniel and Esther***

### **Week 1**

25 He said, "Look! I see four men walking around in the fire, unbound and unharmed, and the fourth looks like a son of the gods."

26 Nebuchadnezzar then approached the opening of the blazing furnace and shouted, "Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, servants of the Most High God, come out! Come here!"

So Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego came out of the fire, 27 and the satraps, prefects, governors and royal advisers crowded around them. They saw that the fire had not harmed their bodies, nor was a hair of their heads singed; their robes were not scorched, and there was no smell of fire on them.

28 Then Nebuchadnezzar said, "Praise be to the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, who has sent his angel and rescued his servants! They trusted in him and defied the king's command and were willing to give up their lives rather than serve or worship any god except their own God. 29 Therefore I decree that the people of any nation or language who say anything against the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego be cut into pieces and their houses be turned into piles of rubble, for no other god can save in this way."

30 Then the king promoted Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in the province of Babylon.

#### **Points of Interest:**

- 'Furious with rage'—I get the feeling Nebuchadnezzar doesn't like it when things don't go his way. He seems like he might be a hard man to work for; constant death threats would probably make the work environment a bit stressful.
- 'if you are ready to fall down and worship the image I made, very good'—I bet Nebuchadnezzar considers himself especially merciful for giving Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego another chance before killing them.
- 'what god will be able to rescue you from my hand?'—Nebuchadnezzar very deliberately makes it a contest of strength between himself and their god.
- 'we do not need to defend ourselves'—Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego take up the challenge on God's behalf. I'm impressed by the difference between the three friends here and the magicians when they were unable to tell the king his dream. The magicians seemed fearful, frantic, and a bit whiny to me (although I must admit it's with some reason). Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, on the other hand, are calmly confident. It's God's job, not theirs, to save their lives.
- 'even if he does not'—I like the fact that, while the three friends do indeed seem to expect God to rescue them, they also face the fact that he might not. Despite the risk, it's not worth it to them to do what they can to save themselves. They would rather die than bow down to the king's flashy display of power.
- 'I see four men walking around in the fire'—Nebuchadnezzar watches to see them die a grisly death as a satisfying example of what happens to anyone who disobeys him. But he sees them comfortably strolling around. I find it interesting that God doesn't prevent them from being thrown into the fire, nor does he snuff out the fire. He instead makes them impervious to the fire, and he sends an angel to untie them and hang out with them there. Rather than rescuing them from a dangerous fire, God shows that, because of his power, the fire is not even dangerous to them.
- 'servants of the Most High God'—Nebuchadnezzar is a surprisingly gracious loser in this contest. He congratulates Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego for successfully defying him, and he recognizes God's supremacy.
- 'there was no smell of fire on them'—I like this detail. The fire is so powerless against them that they don't even pick up any of that smoky smell. In other words, all of the

## ***Daily Bible Guide—Daniel and Esther***

### **Week 1**

watchers are probably more affected by the fire than they are, though they were thrown in it.

- ‘be cut into pieces and their houses be turned into piles of rubble’—Nebuchadnezzar hasn’t been completely transformed by this experience. He still finds it necessary to threaten someone with gruesome death. On the positive side, he now recognizes that the accusations of the three friends were motivated by jealousy and a struggle for power and he puts a stop to these political maneuvers.
- ‘the king promoted Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego’—because of God’s power, this whole episode has the exact opposite result as the astrologers intended.

#### **Taking it home:**

- *For you and your family:* do you have a difficult boss? Our bosses can’t throw us in fiery furnaces, but they can certainly make life unpleasant. I think God wants better for us. Ask God to give you patience with your boss and to give you calm confidence even in the face of unfair criticism. Pray too that God would change your relationship with your boss for the better.
- *For your six:* it can be pretty easy for us to lower our sights to mere survival; but Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego recognize during this story that there are things that are more important than just staying alive. Pray that God would help your six to live a life of true meaning and purpose.
- *For our city, country, or world:* in our media and political environment, it can be difficult, even career-killing, for a politician or government official to admit that they’ve been wrong. It seems to me, though, that not admitting you’re wrong when you are, in fact, wrong, can also have some pretty disastrous effects, especially when you’re governing a city, a state, or a country. Pray that our political leaders would have the boldness and integrity to admit their mistakes; and that it would lead to good results for them and for our city, state, and country.

#### **Sunday, September 16th**

##### **Daniel 4: 1-18**

1 King Nebuchadnezzar,

To the nations and peoples of every language, who live in all the earth:  
May you prosper greatly!

2 It is my pleasure to tell you about the miraculous signs and wonders that the Most High God has performed for me.

3 How great are his signs,  
how mighty his wonders!  
His kingdom is an eternal kingdom;  
his dominion endures from generation to generation.

4 I, Nebuchadnezzar, was at home in my palace, contented and prosperous. 5 I had a dream that made me afraid. As I was lying in bed, the images and visions that passed through my mind terrified me. 6 So I commanded that all the wise men of Babylon be brought before me to interpret the dream for me. 7 When the magicians, enchanters, astrologers and diviners came, I told them the dream, but they could not interpret it for me. 8 Finally, Daniel came into my presence and I told him the dream. (He is called Belteshazzar, after the name of my god, and the spirit of the holy gods is in him.)

## **Daily Bible Guide—Daniel and Esther**

### **Week 1**

9 I said, "Belteshazzar, chief of the magicians, I know that the spirit of the holy gods is in you, and no mystery is too difficult for you. Here is my dream; interpret it for me. 10 These are the visions I saw while lying in bed: I looked, and there before me stood a tree in the middle of the land. Its height was enormous. 11 The tree grew large and strong and its top touched the sky; it was visible to the ends of the earth. 12 Its leaves were beautiful, its fruit abundant, and on it was food for all. Under it the wild animals found shelter, and the birds lived in its branches; from it every creature was fed.

13 "In the visions I saw while lying in bed, I looked, and there before me was a holy one, a messenger, coming down from heaven. 14 He called in a loud voice: 'Cut down the tree and trim off its branches; strip off its leaves and scatter its fruit. Let the animals flee from under it and the birds from its branches. 15 But let the stump and its roots, bound with iron and bronze, remain in the ground, in the grass of the field.

" 'Let him be drenched with the dew of heaven, and let him live with the animals among the plants of the earth. 16 Let his mind be changed from that of a human being and let him be given the mind of an animal, till seven times pass by for him.

17 " 'The decision is announced by messengers, the holy ones declare the verdict, so that the living may know that the Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms on earth and gives them to anyone he wishes and sets over them the lowliest of people.'

18 "This is the dream that I, King Nebuchadnezzar, had. Now, Belteshazzar, tell me what it means, for none of the wise men in my kingdom can interpret it for me. But you can, because the spirit of the holy gods is in you."

#### **Points of Interest:**

- 'To the nations and peoples of every language, who live in all the earth'—it seems that this chapter is written in the form of a public declaration to all of Nebuchadnezzar's subjects. It's predictably grandiosely stated; it might be dawning on Nebuchadnezzar that God is more powerful than him, but he still thinks of himself as running a strong second. Then again, maybe I'm not being fair to Nebuchadnezzar. Maybe he's just so excited about what he learns that he wants the whole world, even people not in his kingdom, to know about it.
- 'contented and prosperous. I had a dream that made me afraid'—once again we see that beneath Nebuchadnezzar's confidence and success there is a lurking uncertainty. Nebuchadnezzar's dreams quickly tap that uncertainty.
- 'He is called Belteshazzar, after the name of my god'—*Belteshazzar* probably means, 'May Bel's Queen protect the king,' although it may just be another form of *Belshazzar*, 'Bel has protected the king.' *Bel* means, 'Lord,' and was the title for Marduk, the principle Babylonian god (*Illustrated Bible Dictionary* 182-183).  
Nebuchadnezzar's spiritual beliefs at this moment seem confusing, complicated, or in flux. On the one hand, he talks a lot about the Most High God as unique in power and authority. On the other hand, he pointedly mentions his god Bel. I can think of a few possible ways of understanding Nebuchadnezzar's current beliefs:
  1. He recognizes the ultimate sovereignty of the Most High God, while still retaining some allegiance to his personal patron Marduk;
  2. Since *Bel* simply means 'lord,' he has re-appropriated the title to the true Lord of gods, the Most High God;

## ***Daily Bible Guide—Daniel and Esther***

### **Week 1**

3. He mentions Daniel's Babylonian name to admit bashfully that he had named Daniel after Bel before he recognized that Daniel worships a god far more able to protect;
  4. He doesn't yet know how to understand his encounters with the Most High God. For what it's worth, I prefer explanations 3 and 4. Of course, there may be other possibilities as well.
- 'let the stump and its roots, bound with iron and bronze'—nothing I've read has even a good guess as to the significance of binding the stump in metal. The overall meaning still seems pretty clear, though: the tree is much reduced from its former glory, but not completely killed off.
  - 'let him live with the animals'—we move from metaphor to concrete reality here. But it's a strange reality. Apparently, the tree is actually a man who will live like an animal for a period of time—or, more exactly, seven periods of time.
  - 'till seven times pass by'—this could mean seven months, seven years, seven seasons, or who knows what (*Bible Background Commentary* 736).
  - 'and gives them to anyone he wishes'—God is so powerful that he can make the most powerful man into nothing or the most humble man into a king. Any king only rules by the gift of God.

#### **Taking it home:**

- *For you and your family:* has God done something exciting for you recently? Consider following Nebuchadnezzar's example by telling someone—or as many people as you possibly can. Start with your family or friends, but don't stop there. Particularly if it's something vulnerable or embarrassing, ask God to give you the boldness you need and the words to say it well.
- *For your six:* are any of your six in a time of spiritual change? Pray that they would have both peace and excitement during this time of spiritual discovery, and that God would bring them through it to a newly fulfilling relationship with him.
- *For our city, country, or world:* this passage tells us that God is the ultimate authority over the people who govern the nations. As you look around at the world, are there any rulers you think are particularly bad for their countries? Ask God to remove them from their positions. If you're confused about how they got there in the first place or why they remain, ask God about that too; see if he has any answers for you.