

Daniel – 2. We also run the risk of being idol worshippers (Nebuchadnezzar's dream image)

Previously I spoke of the remarkable similarity which exists between Daniel and another well known Bible character, Joseph. Both men though they were tempted and could easily have had power and prestige and pleasure, refused to abandon their principles and what they knew and believed to be right. No doubt both men must have struggled within themselves - Joseph over Potiphar's wife and Daniel over the trappings of power which were offered to him; but neither gave way.

Each in his own way is an inspiring example to us, for we know only too well that practically every day we are confronted with similar situations where the temptation is often great to give way on some point of principle or to abandon some moral standard we have come to respect, in favour of the short term advantage it will bring to us.

We noted also how both men would not allow themselves to be swayed in their thinking by the possible consequences of their actions. Daniel in particular, stands out in this regard. Knowing full well what the consequences of his actions would be. Utterly aware as he was of the punishment which had been lined up for those who refused to toe the line, he would not abandon the Lord or forsake his principles. He would not allow himself to be frightened or put off by the thought of the consequences which would come to him.

How relevant this is to you and I! For the fact is that we too easily become concerned about the consequences. The consequences, for example, of giving a straight and honest answer. Whereas we are always better sticking by truth and principle, for when we do this the Lord is able to be with us and to lead us forward to a happy outcome.

However, there is yet another similarity. That is the ability which both men, Joseph and Daniel, possessed in interpreting dreams. Joseph became known as an interpreter of dreams even in jail, and he was brought from jail to interpret a dream which greatly troubled the Pharaoh at that time. In similar circumstances, Daniel was brought before Nebuchadnezzar. All the wise men in Egypt had tried and failed, before Joseph was called. And whilst he made it abundantly clear that it was from no ability which he himself possessed, he went ahead, recounted the dream and, to everyone's astonishment and satisfaction, explained precisely what it meant.

"You looked, O king, and there before you stood a large statue — an enormous, dazzling statue, awesome in appearance. The head of the statue was made of pure gold, its chest and arms of silver, its belly and thighs of bronze, its legs of iron, its feet partly of iron and partly of baked clay. 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. Then the iron, the clay, the bronze, the silver and the gold were broken to pieces at the same time 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." (Daniel 2, v 31-35).

Daniel went on to explain the meaning of the image as depicting a succession of empires and kingdoms, commencing with Babylon itself. He pointed out it was a prophecy of things to come. The different parts of the image stood for the different kingdoms or empires, both Babylon and those which would follow after her. However the last of the four would be a divided kingdom, just as the feet of the image were part iron and part clay. And after them all would be a kingdom established by God "which shall never be destroyed". This, explained Daniel, was what was meant by the rock which destroyed the image and itself filled the whole earth.

The book of Daniel, at first it seems to be a book talking about events at the time of the Fall of Jerusalem in the 6th century B.C. yet it is more likely to have been a book written and circulated at a time of difficulty and persecution for the Jews in the 2nd century B.C. And it is widely thought that this dream of Nebuchadnezzar's, and the interpretation of it, were included and used to give hope to Jews living at that time. They were living at the time of the fourth kingdom, the kingdom depicted by the legs of iron and the feet which were partly iron and partly clay. Soon - such was the message meant to be conveyed - God would raise up and establish His own kingdom which would "never be destroyed" (Chapter 2, 44).

It may well be that this was the message which the author of the book wanted to get across. His concern was to give hope and encouragement to his people and fellow countrymen caught in a situation of which he was very aware and which was, perhaps, causing despair. And it is probable that he had no thought of the book he wrote either being preserved for posterity or as having a message for people outside that particular situation of which we have just spoken.

However the Lord ordained otherwise. In fact He was able to take the book, written as it was for the reasons outlined, and use it as a means of instruction, containing deeper levels and meaning, that would always be relevant to man in whatever age he should be living.

We saw something of this previously. The story was the story of Daniel and his friends refusing to eat the rich and exotic foods of the Babylonians and insisting instead on a plain and wholesome diet on which they were to thrive.

Food is needed both for the body and for the mind and spirit, and though at first it is not apparent, it is this latter food - food for the mind and for the spirit which is being talked about in the story. There are basically two diets being offered to us, yet like Daniel and his companions, we may sometimes have to insist on the alternative. And it is up to us to choose between them.

Are we going to feed our minds, and the minds of our children on ideas and standards which people dream up, on pleasure seeking images, on notions of the importance of being successful and rich and powerful? Which is what is meant by the diet offered by the Babylonians. Or are we going to feed our minds, and the minds of our children on the standards and ideals and concepts and images which the Lord offers us? A plainer diet, for sure. But one which is so much more nourishing.

Just as that story reaches out and has relevance to us because of the internal, spiritual meaning it contains, so too does this story of the image seen by Nebuchadnezzar in his dream. And it is to this that we would now like to turn.

Here is the Lord, as in a parable, trying to teach us things that are important for us to know. Nebuchadnezzar's image collapsed and fell apart because it was built on such an inadequate and insecure foundation. Though gold and silver and brass and iron were the metals out of which the main part of the image was constructed, yet the feet were part iron and part clay. The feet were the weakest part of it. They were no basis at all for an image to rest on.

We have here something which looked very grand and imposing, but which in fact was weak, vulnerable and insecure because of the feet, or the foundation on which it rested.

There is much in life which, similarly, can look grand and imposing but which in fact is weak, vulnerable and insecure because of the feet, or the foundation on which it rests. Certain good works are a case in point. They can seem to be of the finest quality. But if they are based on a regard for ourselves, if in other words, we do good works and carry out acts of charity because we hope to personally benefit from them in some way; we are projecting an image of ourselves, a way of life, which will just as assuredly collapse as that strange structure which Nebuchadnezzar saw in his dream.

Swedenborg shows us that the clay, out of which the feet of the image were partly made, is a symbol of good which has been adulterated or turned to evil because it is good done for the sake of one's self and because we hope to benefit from it in some way. And a life built on such a basis cannot last or be secure.

Babylon is a symbol throughout the Bible, from Genesis to the book of Revelation, of the love of self. What we have then is an image, a structure, a way of life, created by or dreamt up by the love of self when it is active and occupying a leading role in our lives. And the story is given to warn us.

Though in such circumstances there may be love for the Lord and knowledge of His ways; a head of gold and a breast and arms of silver; though there may be present a desire to do good and one may have much knowledge of everyday matters - which is what is meant by the thigh of brass and the legs of iron; all this comes to nothing when used for our own self regarding purposes. The image crumbles and collapses when confronted by Divine truth from the Lord which exposes our motivations and shows us how the love of self is active with us.

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