

Sunday 21 November: God is still at work (Daniel chapter 5)

It seemed that God's plans for Israel were over. After all, the Northern Kingdom had been captured and its people taken away. And now those who had lived in the Southern Kingdom had been marched away to captivity in Babylon. Doesn't this suggest that God's promises to Abraham were cancelled? Doesn't this prove that God wasn't as powerful as he said? When really hard times come, even today people ask these questions about God.

That is why the Bible makes it clear that God was still at work. It seems to me that there were some difficult lessons that his people had to learn. They hadn't learnt them in the past, although God had warned them to listen and obey; now they had to learn them the hard way. Now they would listen for the only thing they had left was God's love. And God wants us to learn these lessons too.

Lesson One: God was greater than any idol

The Israelites had got the wrong idea about God and this had to be put right. They had been influenced by the people around them and had begun to think of him as just another possible god – just another option. They had to rediscover their faith and learn that he could be trusted always to do what he had said. God's warnings about another country capturing them had been ignored. But now they could see that God was wise and could describe the future.

Lesson Two: God is everywhere

Until they went to Babylon, God's people had begun to think of God as a local god, one who was only concerned about the land of Judah. They forgot that he had been their God in Egypt and in the wilderness. They thought they could only pray in the temple in Jerusalem. Now they discovered that God was there with them in Babylon. To prove this God chose a special messenger, Ezekiel. He couldn't speak (!) so he acted out God's messages to the people. But his messages reminded the people that, despite their sin, God was there with them.

Lesson Three: God is for everyone

God wanted everyone everywhere to know him. When some of the brightest exiles (like Daniel) were chosen to become members of the Babylonian government, God used their witness to show the Babylonians that God was the king of the whole world and that he cared about them also! Even king Nebuchadnezzar had the chance to realise that God was greater than his gods. (see Dan 4:37)

So God was definitely still at work. He wasn't dead, nor had he been left behind in Judah.

Lesson Four: God keeps his promises

There were two things God had promised which still had to come true. He had promised that in 70 years' time, his people would be allowed to go back to Jerusalem. He had also said that Babylon would suffer because they had hurt his people.

And that day came. The armies of the Medes and Persians were on the march and the government in Babylon was about to discover what it was like to be ruled by others. .

Historians tell the story about this invasion, but the Bible tells us a detail which history books don't. This story fits in when the invaders were nearly at the capital city. So the king, Belshazzar, decided to have a party to cheer everyone up! Sounds a bit crazy! But that was his plan, it seems. There were 1000 people there and they had lots of food and wine. Everyone drank a bit too much.

In his drunkenness, Belshazzar remembered about the beautiful gold and silver cups which had been stolen from the temple in Jerusalem. Because the Babylonians had been scared of annoying God, they had just stored them away. But Belshazzar wanted to show he wasn't afraid of any god or any army. So he told his servants to fetch them and he and his friends used these holy cups to drink toasts to their gods.

Suddenly there was a dead silence in the room. Everyone was looking at the wall and everyone could see a hand – no body just a hand, writing a message. The king went pale and his knees knocked together. Although he promised great rewards, not one of his wise men could understand the words: MENE, MENE TEKEL AND PARSIN . This wasn't a human message!

Then the queen remembered Daniel. He was an old man by now, and it seems he had retired. Belshazzar had never met him, but he called him in and asked him if he could interpret the message. Daniel relied on God and so God gave him the wisdom and the courage he needed.

He first reminded Belshazzar that his father, Nebuchadnezzar, had come to know God. Bravely Daniel scolded Belshazzar for ignoring this fact. Daniel explained that those who ignore God are punished. God was the Lord of Babylon too. The message was a warning that Belshazzar's days as king were over. His kingdom was going to be divided up as he had 'been weighed on the scales of justice and was found to be too light' in his respect for God. He had wasted his chances.

That very night Belshazzar died as the troops of Medes and Persians took over the city.

Daniel had proved his God was great but he was made to prove it one last time – in the lion's den. And as a result Darius the new king also learnt about God's greatness.

This was all part of God's plan to make his other promise come true. Darius decided that he didn't want to have a whole lot of captives living in Babylon. So 70 years after they had been captured, he passed a law allowing the Jews to go back to Jerusalem – just as God had promised.

The stay in Babylon had been tough love, but God still loved his people and provided for them. The same is true today. Sometimes the world seems dark and hard, but God is always there – even though we don't feel that he is.