

Precursors



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week’s Study: *Dan. 2:31–45; Dan. 3:1–12, 17, 18; Rev. 13:11–17; Rom. 1:18–25; Acts 12:1–17; Matt. 12:9–14.*

Memory Text: “For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind” (2 Timothy 1:7, NKJV).

This week, we will look at two more Bible stories that foreshadow last-day events in remarkable detail.

First, we will examine the account of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, which has obvious allusions to the issues portrayed in Revelation 13. Then we will turn to the New Testament, where we find that the experience of the early Christians also can help us understand what to expect between now and the return of Christ.

Both examples highlight remarkable courage and provide keys to finding peace of mind under the most trying of circumstances.

Again and again, Jesus said such things as “Do not fear,” and “Why do your thoughts trouble you?” It is important to remember that the focus of prophecy is Christ, and, as such, we must be able to find the same counsel throughout the scenes portrayed in earth’s closing moments. “‘Let not your heart be troubled,’ ” He taught His disciples, “‘you believe in God, believe also in Me’ ” (John 14:1, NKJV).

In other words, yes, last-day events will be difficult and trying for those who seek to stay faithful to God. But ultimately, we should view these events with hope, not fear.

* Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, June 21.

Daniel 2 and the Historicist Approach to Prophecy

One of the most powerful prophecies in all Scripture is Daniel 2. Writing more than five hundred years before Christ, the prophet set out world history, starting from his time in Babylon and then through Media-Persia, Greece, Rome, and the breakup of Rome into the nations of modern Europe as they exist today.

In fact, talking about these European nations, one text says that “they will mingle with the seed of men; but they will not adhere to one another, just as iron does not mix with clay” (*Dan. 2:43, NKJV*). This prophecy has been amazingly fulfilled. That is, despite all sorts of intermarriage between the people (from princes to plebes) of these nations, they remain divided.

For example, the British monarchy is called the House of Windsor, a nice English name. However, that name is a relatively recent development—1917, actually. Before then, the family was called Saxe-Coburg-Gotha, a distinctly German name, because many of the British royalty—through mingling “with the seed of men”—were blood relatives with the Germans. However, those blood ties were not enough to keep them from war, and so, during World War I, wanting to dissociate themselves from their hated enemies, they changed the name to the House of Windsor.

Read Daniel 2:31–45. What was Nebuchadnezzar’s dream, and how did Daniel interpret it?

The apocalyptic prophecies in Daniel all follow the foundation set in Daniel 2. That is, the rest of these prophecies, like Daniel 2, follow the sequence of one world empire after another until God establishes His eternal kingdom (*see Dan. 2:44; Dan. 7:13, 14*). In other words, the prophecies go through history in *an unbroken sequence of empires*, starting in antiquity and ending in the future, even to our time. This is the historicist approach to interpreting prophecy and is what the texts demand. This use of the historicist approach is crucial for understanding last-day events, particularly as they are depicted in the book of Revelation.

How does Daniel 2 prove to us that not only does God know the future but that He is, ultimately, in charge of it?

Worshiping the Image

However much fealty Nebuchadnezzar, impressed by what Daniel had done, at first paid to Daniel and to his God (*see Daniel 2, especially vv. 46–48*), it didn't last.

Read Daniel 3:1–12. What significance can be found in the fact that the statue was all gold and that the king demanded that it be worshiped?

The king underscored his defiance of God's message by constructing a statue made *entirely* of gold. The message? Babylon will never fall, and Nebuchadnezzar will always be king. And anybody who dared to challenge that idea would be put to death. It serves as a powerful reminder that our human desire for self-determination can quickly blind us to the truth about how the great controversy will most certainly play out.

In some ways, Nebuchadnezzar displays characteristics of Lucifer: he was ambitious, self-important, and prideful enough to rebel openly against God's authority. In other ways, of course, there are marked differences: Nebuchadnezzar eventually came to faith in the true God, and it is likely that we will meet him in the kingdom he originally fought so hard to defy.

Read Daniel 3:17, 18, the words of the three Hebrew boys in defiance of the king. What does this teach us about faith and what at times it could demand of us?

Think how easily these three men could have rationalized their way out of this dangerous situation. After all, were they not being fanatics, willing to be burned alive over merely bowing down? Couldn't they have just faked it, bowing to tie their shoelaces while praying to their own God? Was it really worth what they were facing? Obviously, they thought so, even though their words showed that they knew that they might not escape with their lives.

How can we avoid the easy rationalizations that present us with opportunities to compromise on our faith? What does this text say that addresses a similar temptation: “ ‘He who is faithful in what is least is faithful also in much; and he who is unjust in what is least is unjust also in much’ ” (Luke 16:10, NKJV)?

Worshipping the Image, Again

Bible students have long seen the connection between Daniel 3 and what Revelation teaches about last-day events. And with good cause, too, because Daniel 3—with the command, punishable by death, to “worship the image” (*Dan. 3:15*)—reflects what Revelation teaches about the command, punishable by death, to worship another image. “He was granted power to give breath to the image of the beast, that the image of the beast should both speak and cause as many as would not worship the image of the beast to be killed” (*Rev. 13:15, NKJV*).

Read Revelation 13:11–17; Revelation 14:9, 11, 12; Revelation 16:2; Revelation 19:20; and Revelation 20:4. What contrast is present here that pits the commandments of God against the commandments of men?

God’s people are called to worship “ ‘Him who made heaven and earth, the sea and springs of water.’ ” That is, the Creator, as opposed to the beast and its image. The three Hebrew boys, facing a similar threat, refused to worship anything other than the same Creator God. Hence, however different the circumstances between what happened on the plain of Dura, with the command to worship the image, as opposed to the Creator and what will happen worldwide with the call to worship the image as opposed to the Creator—the principle is the same.

Read Romans 1:18–25. (Notice the link between Romans 1:18 and Revelation 14:9, 10 about “the wrath of God.”) In what way is the issue over worshipping the image just another manifestation of this same principle regarding to whom humans ultimately give their allegiance?

Worship doesn’t necessarily mean bowing and offering incense, though it can. We worship whatever holds our ultimate allegiance. When you consider who God is, our Creator and—after what He has done for us in Jesus—our Redeemer as well, then of course He alone should be worshiped. Anything else is idolatry. Perhaps this helps explain Jesus’ hard words here: “ ‘He who is not with Me is against Me, and he who does not gather with Me scatters abroad’ ” (*Matt. 12:30, NKJV*). Final events are simply going to be a dramatic manifestation of this truth.

Early Church Persecution

It's not just the Old Testament that gives us precursors to final events; the New Testament does, as well. Life was not easy for first-century Christians. They were hated by many of their own fellow religionists, who saw them as a threat to the faith of Moses. They also faced the wrath of the pagan Roman Empire. "The powers of earth and hell arrayed themselves against Christ in the person of His followers. Paganism foresaw that should the gospel triumph, her temples and altars would be swept away; therefore she summoned her forces to destroy Christianity. The fires of persecution were kindled."—Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, p. 39.

There is a story in the book of Acts that demonstrates, quite powerfully, what God's people might expect as we head toward the scenario found in Revelation 13.

Read Acts 12:1–17. What elements of this story might foreshadow last-day events?

James had been beheaded, and Peter was to be next; there was a death penalty against Christians. Perhaps one of the most remarkable aspects of this story can be found in the fact that Peter is *sleeping* on what should be the worst night of his life—so soundly that the angel actually has to strike him to wake him up!

Peter, of course, was miraculously set free and found his way to a meeting of believers who had trouble believing that he had really been delivered, even though they had been praying. The Bible says they were *astonished*—which makes one wonder how often we pray and scarcely dare to believe that God will actually answer us.

Some believers were spared; others were killed. As we approach the end time, the same thing will happen. Even Peter, though spared then, eventually died for his faith. Jesus Himself even told him how: " 'Most assuredly, I say to you, when you were younger, you girded yourself and walked where you wished; but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will gird you and carry you where you do not wish.' This He spoke, signifying by what death he would glorify God. And when He had spoken this, He said to him, 'Follow Me' " (*John 21:18, 19, NKJV*).

Notice that Jesus, after telling Peter how he would die, nevertheless still says to him, " 'Follow Me.' " What should this tell us about why even the threat of death should not keep us from following the Lord?

The Mark of the Beast

As the years have passed and final events—such as the death decree and the enforcement of the mark of the beast—have not yet happened, some have expressed doubt, even skepticism, about our interpretation of final events, including how Sabbath and Sunday could be central to the final conflict.

The book of Revelation is clear: we either worship the Creator or the beast and its image. And because the seventh-day Sabbath is the foundational sign—going back to Eden itself (*see Gen. 2:1–3*)—of God as Creator, it should not be surprising that, in an issue about worshiping the Creator, the Sabbath would be central. Also, it is no coincidence that the beast power is the same power that claims to have changed the Sabbath commandment from the biblical day to Sunday, which has no sanction in the Bible. With this background in mind, the idea of Sabbath and Sunday being involved in the issue of worship—again, either the Creator (*see Rev. 14:6, 7*) or the beast—makes good sense. And we have in the New Testament a precursor to the issue of the seventh-day Sabbath versus human law.

Read Matthew 12:9–14 and John 5:1–16. What issue caused the religious leaders to want to kill Jesus?

In Matthew 12, after Jesus healed on the Sabbath the man with a withered hand (*Matt. 12:9–13*), how did the religious leaders respond? “But the Pharisees went out and plotted how they might kill Jesus” (*Matt. 12:14, NIV*). *Death because of the seventh-day Sabbath?* In John 5:1–16, after another miraculous healing on the seventh day, the leaders “persecuted Jesus, and sought to kill Him, because He had done these things on the Sabbath” (*John 5:16, NKJV*).

Death because of human tradition (nothing in the Bible forbade healing on Sabbath, just as nothing in the Bible has put Sunday in place of Sabbath) versus the seventh-day Sabbath? Though the specific issue here with Jesus isn’t the same as in final events, it’s close enough: human law versus God’s, and, in both, the contested law centers on the biblical Sabbath.

Dying over one of the commandments of God? How could one easily seek to rationalize one’s way out of that?

Further Thought: Read Ellen G. White, “God’s People Delivered,” pp. 635–652, in *The Great Controversy*.

“In all ages, God has wrought through holy angels for the succor and deliverance of His people. Celestial beings have taken an active part in the affairs of men. They have appeared clothed in garments that shone as the lightning; they have come as men in the garb of wayfarers. Angels have appeared in human form to men of God. They have rested, as if weary, under the oaks at noon. They have accepted the hospitalities of human homes. They have acted as guides to benighted travelers. They have, with their own hands, kindled the fires at the altar. They have opened prison doors and set free the servants of the Lord. Clothed with the panoply of heaven, they came to roll away the stone from the Saviour’s tomb.

“In the form of men, angels are often in the assemblies of the righteous; and they visit the assemblies of the wicked, as they went to Sodom, to make a record of their deeds, to determine whether they have passed the boundary of God’s forbearance. The Lord delights in mercy; and for the sake of a few who really serve Him, He restrains calamities and prolongs the tranquillity of multitudes. Little do sinners against God realize that they are indebted for their own lives to the faithful few whom they delight to ridicule and oppress.”—Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, pp. 631, 632.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Read 2 Timothy 1:7. Discuss the things in prophecy that have worried you most. How do we shake off the spirit of fear and find God’s message of hope even amid the prophecies that talk about persecution for our faith?
- 2 Though right now it might be hard to see how Sabbath and Sunday could become front and center in final events, look at how quickly the world can change. What should this truth teach us about not basing our faith on current events, which can change in an instant, but only on the revealed Word of God?
- 3 Think about Daniel 2 (and even 7). All the empires came and went exactly as predicted. Today, looking back over history, we can see that they did, as predicted. From our perspective today, only one more kingdom is to come. Which one is that, and why can we be assured that it will, indeed, come as predicted?

Epilogue: A Daily Battle

By ANDREW MCCHESENEY

Seventeen-year-old Anders complained of hearing voices at Holbrook Seventh-day Adventist Indian School in the US state of Arizona. The school counselor, Loren Fish, met with him and determined that it wasn't a mental health issue. Staff members prayed.

But then Anders started acting like a possessed person. While at home during school break, he had attended a traditional ceremony. Back at school, the slightly built teen began to exhibit superhuman strength at times, and Holbrook's staff had trouble controlling him. Other times, his eyes rolled back in his head. After an attack, he'd sleep for hours. When he awoke, he acted normal, but he was scared. One day, he asked the boys' dean, "What does Legion mean?" He'd heard the word "Legion" in his head. The dean remembered how Jesus, before healing a possessed man, asked the demon for his name, and the demon replied, "My name is Legion; for we are many" (*Mark 5:9, NKJV*). The registrar, who was mentoring Anders, asked if he would like for the school staff to pray over him. The boy said yes.

In the school's conference room, staff gathered around Anders and began to pray for him. Suddenly, the boy groaned and fell to the floor. No one was sure about what to do. Several people prayed out loud while others sang hymns. Still others urged Anders to pray, "Jesus, help me." Anders could not get the words to come out of his mouth. It was complete chaos. Then Anders started to laugh at the staff. It was a strange, unnatural laugh.

The school's development director, Diana Fish, felt embarrassed. *The devil knows that we don't know what to do*, she thought. Pulling out her cellphone, she googled, "How to help a possessed person." She found a paper titled, "Ellen White on Confrontation with Evil Spiritual Powers" by Marc Coleman on the Andrews University website. "Listen," she said. "We need to be united. We need to command the spirit to leave in Jesus' name."

Immediately, a staff member commanded the spirit, "Come out in the name of Jesus!" Then Anders gasped, "Jesus, help me!" All of the staff exclaimed in unison, "Praise God!" A loud screech came out of the boy. The school's business manager felt something like a strong whirlwind fly past her and out of the room. Then there was peace. Anders lay, weeping, on the floor. Two staff members brought in a cot, and the boy slept for the rest of the afternoon. After that, Anders was better—until he went home again. When he returned, the harassment resumed, and the student left the school.

"We're still praying for him," Diana said. "We know it's a spiritual battle, and it's not over. We deal with the great controversy daily with our students."

This mission story offers an inside look at a previous Thirteenth Sabbath project, Holbrook Seventh-day Adventist Indian School. Anders is a pseudonym. Thank you for supporting the Thirteenth Sabbath Offering on June 28.

Part I: Overview

Key Text: *2 Timothy 1:7*

Study Focus: *Dan. 2:31–45, Rev. 13:11–17.*

For the last two weeks, we have studied biblical stories and psalms that contained allusions to future prophecy. Yet, these projections into the future were just indirect insights that prepared us to receive and to understand the message of prophecy. In this lesson, we will pay attention to prophecies that explicitly refer to the time of the end. We must remember that the Bible is not just a book of beautiful stories written for our entertainment. Nor is the Bible simply a book of spiritual and moral edification. What makes the Bible unique is its message of hope: God will save the world at the end of time.

The message of hope, of course, is present in different forms throughout the Scriptures. But it is particularly the two apocalyptic books, Daniel and Revelation, that focus on the ultimate fate of the world. These two books are inter-related and therefore will be consulted in connection with each other. The lesson this week will first embrace the general line of the prophetic events, as revealed in Daniel's prophecy of the statue (*Dan. 2:31–45*). Then we will consider the last days of human history. We will see how Daniel's prophecy will disclose the power of evil and denounce its mentality, which was already displayed by the Babylonian kings (*Daniel 3*). The prophecy will then reach its fulfillment in the little horn of chapters 7 and 8, and in the beast of Revelation 13 and 14.

Part II: Commentary

The Mentality of Babel. The book of Daniel begins with an allusion to the story of the tower of Babel. As the prophet reports the event of the coming of Nebuchadnezzar against Jerusalem, he mentions the rare and antique word *Shinar*, the very name that referred to the place where the builders of Babel built their tower (*Gen. 11:2, NKJV*). This specific reference reveals, from the beginning of the book, the intention of the biblical author to associate Nebuchadnezzar's move to bring the articles of the temple of Jerusalem to his place, Babylon (*Shinar*), with the builders of the tower of Babel.

In Daniel 2, the same king has a dream that troubles him. Daniel, who has been called to interpret the dream, explains to the king that the God of heaven sent this dream to help him understand, and realize, the iniquity of “the thoughts of your heart” (*Dan. 2:30, NKJV*). Nebuchadnezzar had indeed the same mentality as the builders of the tower of Babel. As Nebuchadnezzar brought the articles of the temple to his own temple, he in fact demonstrated the same intention to take God’s place. From the very beginning, Daniel discloses, then, the key to the dream. This dream concerns first the king’s “Babel” mentality. Later on, in Daniel 3, Nebuchadnezzar’s behavior will confirm this judgment (see below). In fact, this denunciation constitutes the main thread that weaves throughout the whole prophecy of the kingdoms of the earth.

In his first line, Daniel points out Nebuchadnezzar’s pride and usurpation: on one hand, Daniel calls the king by his regular title, “king of kings,” as if he were the one who ruled over other kings. On the other hand, Daniel clearly identifies “the God of heaven” as the only One to whom the king owes his power (*Dan. 2:37, NKJV*). Daniel describes the king as if he were the Creator Himself (at least, along the lines of Nebuchadnezzar’s thinking); at the same time, Daniel reminds the king that it is the God of heaven who gave him all that he has (*Dan. 2:38*).

Then, Daniel announces that the following world kingdoms will be inferior to Nebuchadnezzar’s kingdom, implying, again, that they were just as human and transitory as he and his kingdom are. Significantly, the end of the kingdoms is characteristic of the same mentality that defined Babel: the leaders of the kingdoms will attempt to unite their realms and consolidate their power, just as the builders of the tower of Babel did (*Gen. 11:4*).

It is noteworthy that the main characteristics of this process to attempt to mingle together started right after the fall of pagan Rome (*Dan. 2:41*) and lasted until the end of time, as implied in the phrase that introduces the rise of God’s kingdom: “‘In the days of these kings shall the God of heaven set up a kingdom, which shall never be destroyed’ ” (*Dan. 2:44*).

It is interesting to note that the last scene of the vision climaxes with the crushing of all the kingdoms.

The Usurping Power. In Daniel 3, Nebuchadnezzar immediately (ironically) discredits the judgment just learned from his dream. He will indeed work hard to take the place of the God of heaven. The dream clearly indicates that “the God of heaven will *set up* a kingdom which shall never be destroyed’ ” (*Dan. 2:44, NKJV, emphasis supplied*); in contradistinction to God’s will, Nebuchadnezzar endeavors to “set up” an image of gold that will represent himself, the “‘head of gold’ ” (*Dan. 2:38, NKJV*). Except that Nebuchadnezzar is not just content to be the head of gold, as the dream indicated; he now styles himself as an eternal king, whose empire

will last forever, indicated by his erecting a statue of solid gold. In essence, Nebuchadnezzar “set up” his image to replace the everlasting kingdom of God. Note the use of the same verb “set up.” The story does not stop there with Nebuchadnezzar’s usurpation.

Nebuchadnezzar’s next step was the violent persecution of all those who would not bow before his image. The story tells us that three Hebrews refuse to worship the image; as a result, they are threatened with death, namely to “‘be cast . . . into the midst of a burning fiery furnace’ ” (*Dan. 3:6, NKJV*). All kinds of strategies are used to convince the Hebrews to bow. The threat of death is explicitly represented by the furnace at the feet of the image. The power of administration at all levels is employed to ensure the control of all the various layers of the population. The power of mass media is used to reach out to the people in all parts of the empire. Even the power of music and art is used to influence and control the emotions.

According to the report of their resistance, these three Hebrews did not waver in their conviction to stand true to God. The two camps of worshipers, the camp of Babel and the camp of the three Hebrews, were thus clearly delineated and contrasted: the camp of Babel is noisy. They “cried aloud” (*Dan. 3:4, NKJV*). The camp of God is silent: “‘We have no need to answer’ ” (*Dan. 3:16, NKJV*). The camp of Babel is powerful: it is comprised of “satraps,” “administrators,” etc. (*Dan. 3:2, NKJV*). The camp of God is humble and lowly in eminence: they are simply identified as “‘certain Jews’ ” (*Dan. 3:12, NKJV*). The camp of Babel is numerous: it is composed of “all the people” (*Dan. 3:7, NKJV*). The camp of God is only “three men” (*Dan. 3:23, NKJV*). The camp of Babel is present-oriented: “When all the people heard . . . all the people . . . worshiped” (*Dan. 3:7, NKJV*). The camp of God is future-oriented: “‘God . . . is able to deliver us’ ” (*Dan. 3:17, NKJV*). The people of the camp of Babel are legalistic and obey out of fear and self-interest. The people of the camp of God serve God by grace, even if He should choose not to deliver them (*Dan. 3:18*).

The Little Horn and the Beast. The characters of usurpation and persecution are more vivid and explicit. The little horn claims to be divine, and its arrogance and usurpation are very pronounced (*Dan. 7:25, NKJV*). The same connection between usurpation and persecution is also present (*Dan. 8:24, 25*).

The book of Revelation repeats the same apocalyptic scenario, yet with different symbolism. Right after the same four animals that we first saw in Daniel 7, the apocalyptic revelation identifies a power of usurpation, which is identified as a beast. Like the little horn of Daniel 7 and 8, this beast claims to be divine (*Rev. 13:4*) and persecutes God’s people (*Rev. 13:5, 7*). This rapid survey of the prophecy is necessary for us to understand the prophetic word of warning and to encourage God’s people (*2 Tim. 1:7*).

Part III: Life Application

1. While the little horn and the beast represent a clear historical entity, the Catholic Church, how should we respond to this identification? How should we relate to Catholic people? Identify the mentality of Babel in history (in the Catholic Church, but also in totalitarian regimes). Analyze the potential mechanism of Babel in your church and in your personal character; in your relationship with other people; in the context of your family or in the context of your work; and in the way you treat your employees, your spouse, and your children. How do we shift from a Babel mentality to a biblical mindset?

2. Compare the camp of Babel and the camp of the three Hebrews. Consider each aspect of that comparison and draw lessons for application: How does this comparison affect your church life? What can we learn from these examples for our worship services? How does the way we play music or the way we preach play a role in how we worship the Creator? What lesson do you learn from the observation that the camp of God is always a minority? How do you apply this truth to the use of the argument of the majority in support of theological truth? Discuss with your class members the need to be future-oriented rather than present-oriented. How does future- or present-oriented thinking affect your choices in ethical and marital decisions? A future-oriented perspective obliges us to consider the aftermath of our actions. Present-oriented thinking that focuses on the immediate reward ends up being shallow, selfish, materialistic, and even dangerous for us and others. Discuss.
