

THE LAST ACT

by Ray C. Stedman

We are attempting now to interpret the prophecies of Daniel. In our introductory message we noted that this book of Daniel is rejected by many today as uninspired, having been written by another than the historical personage of Daniel, and containing a lurid sample of what is called "apocalyptic" literature which has no real historic value.

Despite the fact that many critics reject the book of Daniel, it is most interesting to observe that the Lord Jesus highly recommends this prophet. As he sat with his disciples on the Mount of Olives, overlooking the city, among many other things he said to them, "When you see the abomination of desolation which was spoken of by the prophet Daniel, standing in the holy place" {Matt 24:15 KJV}. Then Matthew adds these words in parenthesis, "let the reader understand." By that, Jesus indicates that there is considerable profit to be gained by studying the book of Daniel.

We are now in the second chapter of Daniel, trying to determine the meaning of the great dream image which was first seen by Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, and later recalled to him by Daniel the prophet, and interpreted for him. As we saw, this great dream image, consisting of a man divided into four sections, with a head of gold, chest and arms of silver, belly and thighs of bronze, legs of iron, and feet of mingled iron and clay, constitutes a great outline of history into which all other prophetic passages of the Scripture can be placed. It is our task now to investigate Daniel's interpretation of this dream and especially that part of it which has to do with the fourth division, the fourth kingdom which is to come upon the earth.

Beginning with Verse 36 of Chapter 2, Daniel gives us the interpretation of the dream.

"This was the dream; now we will tell the king its interpretation. You, O king, the king of kings, to whom the God of heaven has given the kingdom, the power, and the might, and the glory, and into whose hand he has given, wherever they dwell, the sons of men, the beasts of the field, and the birds of the air, making you rule over them all -- you are the head of gold. After you shall arise another kingdom inferior to you, and yet a third kingdom of bronze, which shall rule over all the earth." {Dan 2:36-39 RSV}

We saw in our last study that these first three divisions of the image have been already fulfilled in history, and were fulfilled exactly according to the pattern predicted here by Daniel. The head of gold was the empire of Babylon, headed by Nebuchadnezzar, and existing within Daniel's own lifetime. It was superseded as the world power of its day by the divided kingdom of Media-Persia -- first the Medes and then the Persians coming in -- and yet history recognizes it as essentially one kingdom, though there were two ruling families involved. Then this was followed, as we know now from history, by the rapid-fire conquests of Alexander the Great, who swept across the world of his day, conquering the known kingdoms of earth and weeping because he had no other worlds to conquer. This was the "belly and thighs of bronze."

Then Daniel comes to the fourth kingdom. This is of peculiar interest to us because it is within the scope of this kingdom that we still live. As Daniel made clear, this kingdom is to last from the disappearance of the Grecian empire until the time when God sets up his own kingdom on earth. As we focus now on this fourth kingdom we shall have several matters of intense interest suggested to us. Let us look first at Verse 40:

"And there shall be a fourth kingdom, strong as iron, because iron breaks to pieces and shatters all things; and like iron which crushes, it shall break and crush all these." {Dan 2:40 RSV}

This is the prophet's interpretation of the fourth division of the image consisting of the legs of iron and extending clear down to the feet and toes of mingled iron and clay. This was to be the fourth empire. There are several things we can note immediately about this. History interprets a good deal of this for us as we look

backward from our twentieth-century vantage point. It is clear now to us, as it must have been even to those in our Lord's day who read the prophecy of Daniel, that the fourth kingdom began with the Roman Empire.

For three hundred years before Christ, the city-state of Rome, located on the banks of the Tiber River in Italy, had already dominated other city-states and tribes of Italy and had begun to thrust out into the Mediterranean world. Gradually its legions conquered territory throughout Italy and around southern France and into Spain, had crossed the seas into North Africa, was doing long-term battle with Carthage, and had begun to thrust out into Egypt, Greece, and east, almost to India. By our Lord's day, this kingdom was enthroned as the dominant power of earth. It is clear to us, as we look at history, that the Roman Empire was aptly symbolized by the iron of this image, because, as the prophet said, iron breaks to pieces and shatters and crushes. Anyone who has read the story of the Roman Empire knows how characteristic this was of Rome. They were dominated by a passion to rule the world and they had the power to achieve it and to continue that rule. Roman legions were known everywhere for their ability to fight, to march in and overwhelm all opposition, utilizing the short sword which became the famous mark of the Roman soldier. The Roman phalanxes and legions moved throughout the earth and eventually dominated every kingdom known to the Western world.

The chief mark of Rome was its resolute will to conquer. Will Durant, in his remarkable volumes, *The History of Civilization*, tells us that the Roman senate sometimes deliberately began wars in order to acquire further wealth for Rome or to quiet unrest among the plebeians and slaves at home. The Roman legions became synonymous with peace so that men boasted of what they called the *Pax Romana*, a peace of conquest by military might which kept everything stable and quiet throughout the Empire.

The third thing suggested by this prophecy is that Rome would stamp its image upon the entire Western world. Here is where we of the Western hemisphere enter the picture. The Roman government was marked by a passion to establish colonies and then to defend these colonies by military power. That characteristic of Rome has continued throughout the history of the West. Western nations have been colonizing nations who have reached to the uttermost parts of the earth. With the colonizing came the necessity for great military power to protect the trade routes and the colonies from being overwhelmed by others. Thus the Western nations became mighty militarily, protecting the colonies which they had established.

The Roman Empire was soon divided into two portions, corresponding to the two legs of iron of this image. One division was in the West, centered in Rome; the other was in the East, with Constantinople its capital, and became the Byzantine empire which colonized toward the north, into Russia, and into the east, to Persia, Iran and Iraq, and spread Byzantine culture all through the area.

In the West the empire centered on Rome. It first mastered the whole of the Mediterranean area and Western Europe and even after the fall of Rome itself continued to dominate as the kingdoms of Europe, the monarchies of France, of Germany, Spain, Great Britain and Portugal. These, in turn, began to reach into the western hemisphere after Christopher Columbus discovered the New World. The interesting thing now is that every single nation of this western hemisphere was begun by one of the nations of the Roman empire. Our entire Western world is Roman to the core. You can see that even in our own history. We have a senate which is one of the fundamental bases of our government, and which we copied directly from the Roman senate. The very republican form of the United States government is based upon the republic of Rome. Our courts, our laws, our military, all reflect the courts and laws and military forms of the Roman Empire. We even derived our national symbol from Rome. The American eagle is known throughout the world as were the Roman eagles in the days of Rome's power.

In Europe today there is an even more remarkable tracing of Roman heritage possible. As students of history know, the Goths and Huns and other pagan tribes of the north swept down over the Alps, overran Italy, and finally sacked the city of Rome. There emerged from this chaos what is called in history, "the Holy Roman Empire." The Church became a stabilizing influence through all that time and the Pope emerged finally as a Roman ruler. It was still Roman, but it was now a religious empire. The seat of imperial government was transferred first to France, then into Spain, and finally ended up in Germany. The German rulers were called *Kaisers*, which is simply the German spelling of the word *Caesar*, so it is apparent that the Roman Caesars were perpetuated in the Western empires as the Kaisers.

A strikingly similar thing took place in the Eastern empire under the Byzantines. In about 1453 the city of Constantinople was sacked by the northern tribes and the seat of government was ultimately transferred from Constantinople to Russia. The ruler was called the *Czar*, which is the Russian spelling of *Caesar*. Thus the Roman Caesars have continued right up to modern times. What to me is a fascinating footnote to history is that both of these divisions of the Roman Empire, in its imperial form, ended in the same year, 1918, when the Russian Czar was overthrown and murdered by the Bolsheviks as they came into power in Russia, and the German empire with the Kaisers ended at the close of World War I. So we have the whole of the Western world as an extension of this mighty fourth kingdom which Daniel saw was to dominate the earth. It is stamped with the Roman image from that day to this. It is still Roman, and only recently has ceased to colonize, and thus dominate, major parts of the earth. Vast military power is characteristic of the fourth kingdom throughout its duration.

In Verse 41 a strange and remarkable new element enters into the picture. Daniel says to the king,

"And as you saw the feet and toes partly of potter's clay and partly of iron, it shall be a divided kingdom; but some of the firmness of iron shall be in it, just as you saw iron mixed with the miry clay." {Dan 2:41 RSV}

There was a sense in which the Western kingdom was "divided" between the Roman and Byzantine Empires, analogous to the legs of the image, but now here is a different division. This is a division in character which comes in at the foot stage of the image. The legs were made of solid iron, but Daniel saw that the feet of the image were made of mingled iron and clay.

What is the symbolism of this? The clay is obviously the opposite of iron. Iron symbolized an imperialistic attitude or form of government, the power and might of imperialism seeking to dominate and to rule by brute force and strength. Clay, on the other hand, is weak, pliable, easily molded. Most Bible scholars are right in identifying this as the principle of democracy. Perhaps that may cause us to bristle a bit. We do not like to see democracy attacked. We like to think that the reason the United States and Great Britain have become strong nations is because they are democracies; that it is the voice of the people that gives strength. But if you look at history, especially the history of the West, in the light of the revelation of Scripture and in an honest evaluation of democracy, you will discover that democracy is not really a very good form of government.

The voice of the people is always a fickle voice. It is easily molded, like clay. That is what politicians capitalize on. Every election year you can hear them shaping the clay, molding the clay into the opinions they want them to have. Today we are subject to the tremendous pressures of mass media which play upon our minds to mold the will of the people. That is the weakness of democracy.

Let me share with you an interesting quotation which I think you will find most significant, especially in view of when it was uttered. It is called, *Why Democracies Fail*.

Democracy cannot exist as a permanent form of government. It can only exist until the voters discover they can vote themselves largesse out of the public treasure. From that moment on, the majority always votes for the candidate promising the most benefit from the public treasury, with the result that democracy always collapses over a loose fiscal policy, always to be followed by a dictatorship, and then a monarchy.

That sounds as if it was written today, does it not? But it was written by professor Alexander Fraser Tytler, nearly two centuries ago, while our thirteen original states were still colonies of Great Britain. At the time he was writing of the decline and fall of the Athenian Republic, over two thousand years before. It is a clear and honest evaluation of democracy. No, it is not democracy that has made the United States great; it is another element -- the same element which produced greatness for a considerable period in Great Britain and other nations. Scripture reveals that the element which makes a nation great is righteousness. When righteousness pervades a nation that people is strong; without righteousness it begins to falter. That is why we are seeing our American democracy beginning to totter, stagger, and crumble. The element of righteousness is fast disappearing within it. Democracy has no power to stand or be strong unless righteousness is there. This one thing God's word clearly reveals: "righteousness exalts a nation, but shame is a reproach to any people." In the words of the motto of the state of Hawaii, *Ua mau ke ea o ka aina i ka pono*, which means, "The life of the

land is preserved in righteousness." That has been the fundamental secret of the strength of the United States.

In this passage the prophet Daniel says the kingdom is to be so divided. In the final stage of this collection of Western nations, dominated by Roman principles, there would come a struggle for dominance between two principles: the iron of imperialism, and the clay of democracy. These two things would struggle and attempt to mingle together.

As we look back in history we can see that World War I marked the beginning of the end of an era. The end of that war was characterized by the fall of crowned heads all over the world. Many monarchies ended then, either abruptly and completely, or they were transformed into representative monarchies in which the king became merely a figurehead, exercising no power or authority at all.

World War II completed the picture; the age of kings ended in that interim period. From that time on there has been clearly emerging a new age, a new condition among nations. It is described for us in Verses 42-43, when we come to the very toes of the feet of the image.

"And as the toes of the feet were partly iron and partly clay, so the kingdom shall be partly strong and partly brittle. As you saw the iron mixed with miry clay, so they will mix with one another in marriage, but they will not hold together, just as iron does not mix with clay." {Dan 2:42-43 RSV}

The phrase translated in the RSV, "in marriage," is not too accurate. Literally, it is (in the King James), "they shall mingle together with the seed of men," which seems to imply a universal application, i.e., this is a grass roots matter, it permeates the masses. In the stream of humanity these two conflicting currents struggle together, and as we near the end of this fourth kingdom it becomes a struggle at the grass roots level. It strikes me as highly significant that this is what we see arising in our own day. I am not going to be dogmatic on this as being positively the fulfillment of this prophecy, but the trend seems to be unmistakable.

What is happening in the nations of the West in our day? Well, clearly they are torn by domestic strife. They are being weakened by internal conflict. There is enough iron yet to threaten with the power and strength of ancient Rome, but there is enough clay to weaken and paralyze so that nations are unable to accomplish their objectives. Thus we have the sight of great and powerful nations which are almost helpless to carry out what they set themselves to do. They are being throttled and thwarted by internal weakness, by struggles breaking out from within, by the unmixable principle of the voice of the people and the iron will of authority in conflict.

This is what sets the stage for the final act of history. By this the world becomes ripe for the invasion of God. That last act is given to us now in Verses 44-45:

"And in the days of those kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom which shall never be destroyed, nor shall its sovereignty be left to another people. It shall break in pieces all these kingdoms and bring them to an end, and it shall stand for ever; just as you saw that a stone was cut from a mountain by no human hand, and that it broke in pieces the iron, the bronze, the clay, the silver, and the gold. A great God has made known to the king what shall be hereafter. The dream is certain, and its interpretation sure." {Dan 2:44-45 RSV}

Our attention is immediately drawn to this opening phrase, "And in the days of those kings." What kings? There have not been any kings mentioned in this passage at all. Kingdoms, yes; kings, no. "In the days of those kings" -- what a cryptic reference this is. But as you compare this passage with other passages in the seventh chapter of Daniel, and also with the book of Revelation, it becomes clear that the final form of the Western confederacy of nations will be the emergence of a confederation of ten nations, here symbolized by the ten toes of this image. The only possible antecedent for the reference to "those kings" is the ten toes of the image. In the days when the ten-kingdomed empire emerges as the final form of the fourth kingdom (essentially Roman in its emphasis and characteristic), then God, in those days, shall set up a kingdom which shall not be destroyed.

Daniel saw in the dream that a stone was cut out of the mountain without hands and struck the entire image

crumbled, suddenly, dramatically. Then the stone grew until it became a mountain that filled the entire earth. It is not difficult to interpret this imagery. The stone is identified for us clearly in Scripture. The Apostle Peter gathers up several passages out of the Old Testament and identifies the stone for us. In First Peter, Chapter 2, Verse 6, he says:

For it stands in scripture:

"Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious, and he who believes in him will not be put to shame." {1 Pet 2:6 RSV}

To you therefore who believe, he is precious, but for those who do not believe, "The very stone which the builders rejected has become the head of the corner," and "A stone that will make men stumble, a rock that will make them fall;" for they stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do.

What a remarkable revelation of the authority, power, and right of Jesus Christ to rule among the kingdoms of men! He is the stone that comes striking suddenly into the affairs of mankind -- God once again intervening dramatically in history to destroy all that man has built through the centuries. The entire structure of civilization collapses and crumbles at the impact of this mighty stone, and the stone in turn grows to fill the entire earth. This clearly introduces the millennial kingdom which has been prophesied by the prophets.

What is our part in all this? If we stand, as I believe this passage clearly suggests, at the termination of civilization as we know it; if we are approaching the end of man's day and God's program which the prophets have long predicted is at last to be established, then Peter suggests that it is our privilege now to rejoice in that "chosen and precious stone." The question that impinges upon us in this hour is, What is our relationship to that stone? Is he the foundation for our life, or is he coming to destroy all that we have built? Is the coming of the Lord to us a thrill, or is it a threat? Is he coming as a friend, or as a foe?

The purpose of prophecy is to help us keep our lives balanced, now. What are you going to do tomorrow? You say. "Well, I've got to go back and make a living." Yes, God is interested in you making a living. Prophecy does not remove us from the need to make a living. But it does face us up to the question: What else am I doing tomorrow, and Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday and throughout the whole week? Even those who are not Christian will be engaged in making a living. But, if I belong to the Lord Jesus Christ, what else is involved? Am I doing nothing more than simply trying to get ahead, like the rest of the world? Or am I also investing in eternal issues that will last beyond this time? That is the question which is important. It is a tragic possibility that one may know the Lord, and know the Scriptures, and yet arrive at the end of life and, looking back, find that much of it has been wasted because it was invested only in that which was to crumble and be dispersed to the winds at the coming of Christ.

I find the great hunger of every heart is to do something permanent, something worthwhile, something enduring. These great prophetic Scriptures are designed to face us up with the question: Am I now being an available instrument for the working of God to do his purpose, in terms of my work, my school, my play, or whatever? Am I walking in harmony to the eternal program God is working out through the forces of history? Or am I related only to that which ultimately shall crumble and be scattered to the four winds?

That is the great question before us as we come to the Lord's table. Has he become to us a rock, a stone chosen and precious upon which all life must be built and from which all values come? If so, then we can fellowship together in his Spirit and enjoy the fellowship of faith in the oneness of the body of Christ.

Prayer:

Our Father, as we come to the Lord's table, we pray that we may grasp the swiftness of passing time, and the certainty of the fulfillment of prophecy. Help us to understand ourselves, Lord, in the light of your word. Help us to see our lives as revealed by the light that streams from that word. May we at this time, Lord, renew that marvelous relationship of love, truth, and faith in the Son of God who has called us out of the kingdoms of this world to be part of the kingdom of his love. We ask this in Jesus' name, Amen.

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