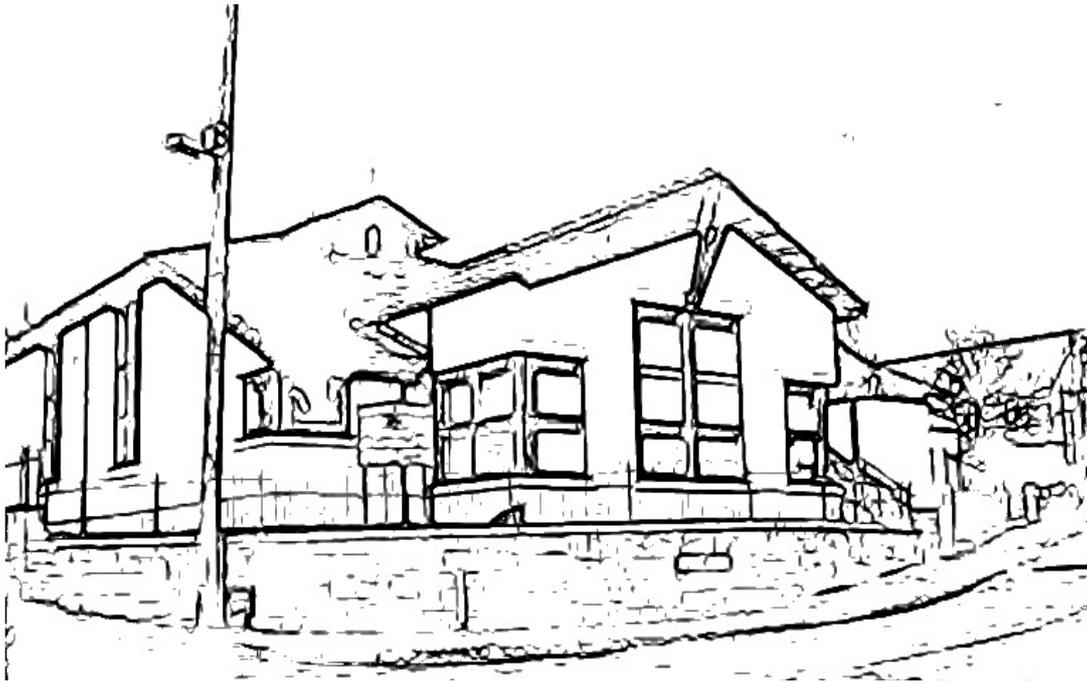


Torrance Parish Church
Church of Scotland



Philemon (ALL) Daniel 1 to 4:19-27

JAN/FEB 2014

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Philemon

Wednesday 1st January 1:3

The Letter to Philemon was written by Paul during his imprisonment in Rome, recorded in Acts 28:14b-31. The letter to the Colossians was written at the same time and both letters were sent by the hand of Tychicus who was accompanied by Onesimus, the slave who is the central figure in this short epistle (Col. 4:7-9). We need to note carefully that this letter is not just a personal appeal from Paul to his Christian friend Philemon on behalf of the runaway slave Onesimus. It is written to the church (2) meeting in his house, and this may indeed be identified with the church in Colossae for that town was small and relatively unimportant. From Col. 4:12-17 it is clear that Paul expected there to be an interchange of letters between the churches of Colossae, Laodicea and Hierapolis which formed a closely related group. This being so we need to take Paul's words on the subject of masters and slaves in Col. 3:22-4:1 in close connection with the letter to Philemon which illustrates the principle of master-servant relationship in one specific case of the runaway slave who had absconded with some of his master's belongings. We are dealing with the principles and attitudes that should govern all of working life. The theme is the application of the gospel to the whole of life.

Thursday 2nd January 1-3

When Paul introduces himself at the beginning of a letter he describes himself sometimes as an apostle (Col.1:1), emphasising his authority, sometimes as a bond slave or servant of Jesus (Rom.1:1), emphasising the surrender of all his personal rights to the One who is his Master. But here he simply refers to himself as a prisoner for Jesus' sake, perhaps indicating in a quiet way just how much he had lost and suffered for the gospel's sake. If this is so then he sets his own loss of all things (Phil. 3:7- 8) over against Philemon's loss of a slave. He sets forth his own refusal to claim his rights according to the pattern of Christ (Phil. 2:5-8) as an example and challenge to the church in the house of Philemon. It may seem an obvious thing to us that the converted slave should be forgiven and reinstated rather than punished, and indeed we may wonder why Paul did not denounce the whole business of slavery which was an accepted part of the society of his day. We must remember that it is easy to denounce social evils, especially if they are at a distance, just as many denounce apartheid in far-off lands while condoning and participating in the social injustice and sexual immorality in their local situation and personal lives. We need to remember that in the world, as in the church, it is easy to stir commotion and to start a revolution, but far more demanding to build something healthy and stable for future generations. Any fool can be a critic

and knock things down, but it takes wisdom, faith, self-sacrifice and a lot of hard work to build a new society. Of course, as God made plain to Jeremiah (Jer. 1:9-10) the two processes go on together under the wise providence of God. Don't ever forget God who is always at work.

Friday 3rd January 1-3

Consider this quotation from a. secular document dated A.D. 298 as an indication of the social attitude which is the context of our studies. 'I commission you by this writ to journey to the famous city of Alexandria, and search for my slave about 35 years of age, known to you. When you have found him you shall place him in custody, with authority to shut him up and whip him, and to lay a complaint before the proper authorities against any persons who have harboured him, with a demand for satisfaction.' Slaves had no rights. They were simply the property of their masters and the treatment they received would vary according to the temperament and attitude of the master. We read in the gospels of secular men who loved their slaves (Matt. 8:5-6; Lk. 7:2-3). In the Old Testament clear distinction was made between the Jewish and Gentile slaves, the former having a right to freedom after seven years, plus provision to enable them to make a new start in life, with the choice, if so desired, of staying with their masters (Ex. 21:2-6; Dent. 15: 12-18). This suggests that slavery was not always the terrible thing we reckon it to be. Of course, there were rogues and profiteers as there are in every generation. It does not follow in our day that because a man is a Christian he will necessarily deal honestly with you in business! That is sad but true. The story of Joseph in Egypt tells of one kind of slavery (Gen. 39:1-6) but Ex. 21:20-21 tells of brutal discipline, and 1 Sam. 30:11-15 tells of men being abandoned when they became a burden. The whole of this subject of slavery is dealt with fully in such reference books as the New Bible Dictionary (IVP) and shows the dangers of sweeping generalisations. The means by which this and other social evils can be dealt with are not always immediately evident, and in our own day when the 'theology of liberation' is the vogue we must be wise under God in word and action lest the issue is merely greater confusion and bondage.

Saturday 4th January 1-3

There is a note of grace and an atmosphere of graciousness set right at the start of this letter written by a man who had forfeited all freedom for Jesus' sake and who had accepted his personal restrictions without bitterness (Phil. 4:11-12). Paul was not going to ask from Philemon any standard of Christian behaviour and personal loss which he himself had not already met.

Example is a powerful witness and appeal (John 13:12-17; 1 Pet. 2:21-23). Paul's warm greeting names three people, Philemon, whose work he sets alongside his own; Apphia, possibly his wife; and Archippus their son, whom Paul describes as a fellow soldier, possibly ministering to the church in

Laodicea. (Could it be that the issue of the treatment of slaves was part of the decline into lukewarmness of this wealthy church - Rev. 3:14-22?) When Paul greets also the church in their house he may be referring to the fact that the whole household of Philemon had been converted when the gospel was first preached in that area. We have so individualised the gospel that we find this kind of thing almost foreign to us and we react emotionally rather than theologically to the idea of household baptism as in Acts 16:31-34. But the family was much more a unit in these days (and in some areas of the world it still is) and such were the bonds of love and loyalty within the family that the influence of grace touching and saving one member would very likely win the others also. Think of Joshua's testimony in Joshua 24:15. We have so much to learn about this (1 Cor. 7:12-16; 1 Pet. 3:1-2) and if our eyes were more on God and our hearts more fixed on His gracious covenant promises, we would live more by faith than by fear.

Sunday 5th January 4-7

The church in Philemon's house could have been simply his own family together with his slaves or it could have been the regular meeting place of the believers in that community. If the latter was the case then Paul would have seen to it that there was some order and discipline by appointing elders as he did in every place (Acts 14:23; 2 Tim. 2:2; 1 Pet. 5:1-3). This is important, in our day when 'house churches' have become a fashionable alternative to gathering with the main body of believers. This is not, to devalue house groups but to emphasise that a group of believers is not necessarily a church. It may be a fellowship and a beneficial one in terms of prayer, Bible study and in that personal one-to-one friendship that is not always possible in a big congregation. But there are dangers, psychological as well as spiritual. Some like to organise others because it satisfies their desire for power and gives a sense of significance over against their innate insecurity. Some gather around them the wrong kind of people and others make a wrongly elitist group. Sometimes a house-church can start as something manifestly useful and God-honouring, and in time, perhaps unconsciously, become something quite different in inspiration and influence. But all these dangers apart, we do learn from these verses the great realm of service that is possible through our homes. Remember Jesus' words, 'I was a stranger, and you took Me in,' (Matt. 25:35 and the words of Heb. 13:2 regarding entertaining angels unawares. There was a lorry driver's home in Devonport and a missionaries' home in Colombo that did more to establish and encourage me in my early days of conversion than I could ever put into words. It is not a case of lavish entertaining, which can be a distraction, but one of caring. Take care of Jesus' sheep and lambs (John 21:15-17).

Monday 6th January 4-7

Paul is always telling people that he prays for them and also makes plain what it is he prays for. It is marvellous to know you can count on people's prayers but an added blessing when they tell you. On the other hand what an encouragement to prayer it is when you hear of the manifest growth in grace of those you pray for. Note how Paul speaks of 'my' God. It is something very personal and may indicate the depth of Paul's thinking about the Covenant-keeping God who had made him His own and who was not ashamed to be called his God (Heb. 11:16). Note also that the testimony to the grace of Philemon was quite unsolicited. Paul had heard from others, as he had heard about the Thessalonians (1 Thess. 1:2-10) and, of course, Paul did his own bit of good-speaking about others (2 Thess. 1:3-4), which is so much healthier than forever indulging in niggling criticism and detraction. What pleased Paul about this group of Christians was that their love and faith were vitally bound together. Their love was not vague sentiment, nor was their faith vague credulity or cold doctrine. Their faith was centred on the Lord Jesus and their love was expressed to all the saints for their refreshment and encouragement. This loving faith and faithful loving had not operated only in the local fellowship. Its overflow had reached Paul himself and, as is always the case, the loving pastor and teacher had been mightily heartened by the manifest growth in grace of those he had laboured among and prayed for. We cannot emphasise too much the fact that we are members one of another and give and receive far more than we realise, for better or for worse.

Tuesday 7th January 4-7

There is an important lesson in v, 6 concerning the sharing of faith and follows on from the closing words of yesterday's note. Observe that it is a sharing of faith and not a recounting of experiences, nor that unhealthy sharing of sins and problems which has become a modern evangelical obsession. The sharing of faith with others has its objective in increasing knowledge and grasp of all the blessings that are ours in Christ Jesus. In terms of growth in grace, personal holiness and spiritual service, it is essential that we should have a clear realisation of all that we now possess in Christ. This is the heart of the matter. We do not go looking for 'the blessing' or for some indefinable 'extra' that will make us 'real' Christians. We must rather listen to what the Bible tells us of what Christ has done for us and what we have been given in Him. Fundamental to our whole position is that we have been blessed with all spiritual blessings and have been sealed and guaranteed in respect of salvation and life by the indwelling Holy Spirit (Eph. 1:3-14). We have been raised from the dead to newness of life in Christ Jesus (1 Pet. 1:3-9; Rom. 6:4). We lack nothing, for all things are ours (1 Cor. 3:21-23). We could range through the New Testament pondering all the passages which speak of the full, three-dimensional salvation from sin, self and Satan, from the world, the flesh

and the Devil, that is ours totally and unconditionally in Christ. This is indeed glorious gospel news and opens for us a new way of life and a new pattern for our dealings with one another. In this way Paul had now prepared the way for his objective in this letter which was an appeal to the converted slave-owner on behalf of Onesimus.

Wednesday 8th January 8-10

The word 'therefore' indicates that Paul's words are based on and stem from the profound spiritual truths enunciated in the first seven verses. He had spoken of faith, love and fellowship in Christ. He had emphasised the need to be 'active in sharing your faith' (v.6). And he had spoken openly in the church regarding the manifest and deserved reputation Philemon had as a man of true Christian love. Therefore, on the basis of love, without in any way denying his apostolic right to command, Paul appealed for clemency for the slave. When Paul spoke of what ought to be done, he was indicating that a spiritual principle was involved in this matter of 'industrial relations', and that a certain attitude was incumbent on Philemon as a Christian duty. But Paul did not take the solemn road of duty, even though he mentioned it, but as an ambassador he appealed for reconciliation, as he did also in 2 Cor. 5.20. He refers to himself as 'Paul, an old man' and thus make the appeal a very tender and lowly one. Here is the King's ambassador, invested with royal power, but bowing with tender entreaty. Is there not a reflection here of our Lord's gracious humility in bending low down to the sinful sons of men? Paul yielded his apostolic honour, because position and rights meant little to him, and in doing so he set a very demanding standard for Philemon for it was his rights as a master that he ought now to yield for Jesus' sake. We need to read the great chapter on love in 1 Cor. 13, perhaps in J.B. Phillips' translation, and then we need to ponder the fact that the love of God has been poured out into our hearts by the Holy Spirit who has been given to us (Rom. 5:5). The pattern for all relationships is that of Jesus.

Thursday 9th January 10-12

These verses overlap and we must hold to their sequence and development. We are not told how Onesimus ever reached Rome, how he was brought into contact with Paul, how often or in what circumstances he heard the gospel, but we are told he was converted through the instrumentality of the great missionary. It is thrilling to see the value Paul put on this humble convert. He may not have been valued highly by the world's standards but he was precious to the Lord and to Paul, redeemed at infinite price (1 Pet. 1.18- 19). But there is more than spiritual valuation; there is human affection, and it shows the bond between Paul and his converts. 'It is a comment too on what the grace of God has wrought in the apostle himself. This is the one-time self-righteous Pharisee, the heir of Jewish exclusiveness,

and he is speaking of a Gentile, and a Gentile slave at that, from the very dregs of Roman society yet he can refer to him as a son. So his statement (Col. 3: 11) that 'there is neither Greek nor Jew bond or free' is no empty formula but, reflects the attitude of heart to which he himself has been brought by God.' (Carson). The name 'Onesimus' means useful or beneficial and there is a pun on the man's name in v.11. A slave who has run away is a dead loss, but when that slave returns a new creature in Christ Jesus (2 Cor. 5: 17) with a revolutionised attitude to work (Col. 3:22-23), then he is useful indeed. But the usefulness is not just on the old level as a working slave, possibly with some specialised training, but on a new spiritual level. Paul is saying to Philemon that to have a Christian man like Onesimus on the staff will be nothing but benefit. Would your employer or your minister give you a reference like that? Would you prove worthy of it?

Friday 10th January 10-12

What a wealth of love and what an appeal of love there is in v.12! 'Paul speaks of what it cost him to send Onesimus back; and how he would gladly have retained him. In sending him he has sent part of himself.' (Carson) It was for the good of Onesimus and of Philemon, and for the instruction of and as an example to the whole church that this sacrificial and costly decision was taken. It all points to the Cross of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ who did not grasp His rights but made Himself of no reputation (Phil. 2:6-7). Though He was rich, for our sakes He became poor so that through His poverty we might be made rich (2 Cor. 8:9). We are compelled to think of the Father who spared not even His own Son but freely gave Him up for us (Rom, 8:32). When we read of Paul sending his very heart, do we not think of John 3; 16 and of the deep words of Paul in Acts 20:28 when he spoke of the church of God which He purchased with His own blood? We will never really plumb the depth of redeeming love, nor can we ever escape from the comprehensive appeal of Peter, based on the Saviour's dying love (1 Pet. 1; 18ff). The great men of God have always been moved to see that the Cross excluded all pride and glorying (Gal, 6; 14) and they would have said their 'Amen' to the words of C.T. Studd. 'If Jesus Christ be God and died for me, no sacrifice is too great for me to make for Him.'

'Were the whole realm of nature mine,
That were an offering far too small;
Love so amazing so divine,
Demands my out, my life, my all.'
(Watts)

Saturday 11th January 13-14

Note how Paul speaks here of personal desire and inclination (13) and then as an act of will

sets duty first (14). Doing right was the important thing to Paul. This does not mean, as some foolish people seem to think, that the unpleasant must always be the will of God. That suggests that God is at best a spoilsport and at worst perverse. He is neither. But it is all too easy to rationalise and to persuade ourselves that what will be pleasant and immediately satisfying must be God's will, so that we neglect the plain issues of duty. It would have been easy for Paul in prison circumstances to keep Onesimus and to say, 'I'm sure Philemon would agree.' But Paul would not presume upon his good friend, especially on such a touchy issue as taking the side of a runaway slave who had stolen from his master's house. Neither would Paul be the kind of man who would listen to tittle-tattle and complaint about his master from a runaway slave who had put himself in the wrong by his own actions. We do well to abstain from all appearance of evil (1Thess. 5:22) and to remember the clear principles of the law of God regarding the value of independent witnesses, lest we be taken in by false accusation (Deut 17:6). Paul's attitude to Philemon respecting his personality, rights and his dignity is worthy of emulation. Friendship must never be presumed upon and familiarity must never be mistaken for intimacy. A great deal of misunderstanding and hurt, and indeed hindrance to the work of the Gospel, would be avoided if we would only learn to give people their place and to treat them with the same grace as the Lord Jesus has shown to us.

Sunday 12th January 13-14

Note how wisely Paul dealt with his friend, indicating in v.13 the responsibility he had to minister to Paul. Here and elsewhere Paul stated the principle that those who receive blessing through a human instrument of the gospel are under obligation to respond in practical terms. There is such a thing as spiritual debt and Paul hoped that Philemon would discharge that debt willingly and gladly. If we look back to v.8 we see that Paul had already made plain the spiritual issue. For the work's sake Philemon really had no choice and Paul could well challenge him in such a way before the whole church that he would have no option but consent. This kind of approach is sometimes necessary but it is not wise to use it as a first approach. To take a collision course when alternatives are available is folly and it is sinful. We do well to learn in this context that a gentle answer turns away wrath (Prov. 15:1), and if some people misconstrue this as softness, weakness or even cowardice it is just too bad. God knows. Later in the letter Paul reminded Philemon of just how great his debt was (19b), for he owed his very conversion to this suffering servant of the gospel. What Paul was calling for from Philemon was true generosity of spirit, for God loves the cheerful giver (2 Cor. 9:7). It is sometimes said that one volunteer is worth ten picked men and, while we would not consent totally to such a premise, it is certainly true that some people's spiritual lives are stunted because they have never in all their lives

done one truly generous act. There is no real reason why we should be reluctant to be Christlike. He is our example as well as our Saviour.

Monday 13th January 15-16

Paul's close reasoning pressed in on Philemon and this letter being read to the whole church must have become one of the initial influences to bring about a total change in the attitude to slavery and to the whole of human relationships. In v.13 Paul had made it clear that he assumed that Philemon would jump at every chance of ministering to him and he suggested that this had in fact taken place through Onesimus. Just as Paul thought of himself as a personal representative of Jesus, so Philemon had to think of Onesimus as *his* representative. In this way Paul now introduced the thought of God's providential ordering of this whole situation. That God was in it cannot be doubted, for the slave was converted and became a useful Christian worker with Paul. This does not mean Paul was excusing the slave's stealing or his lawbreaking in running away. It is never useful to suggest that wrong is right but in the context of human wickedness and sin there is a greater hand at work. This is the lesson of the story of Joseph's interpretation of his life's experiences when his brother sold him into slavery. They meant evil but God was working for the long-term good of His people and his work (Gen. 50:15-21). If we marvel at this defection of a slave turning out to be a significant factor in the purposes of God, how much more we must marvel at the defection of the Jews in the crucifying of their Messiah-King resulting in the salvation of the world (Rom. 11:11-12). We underestimate God and all too often we think He is not in a situation just because we cannot see Him.

Tuesday 14th January 15-16

If our eyes were more truly fixed on God, and our wills more securely resting in His good and perfect will and in His power to bring it to pass, we would learn to make much more gracious interpretations of situations than we tend to do. We must learn to accept by faith (for we will never do it by sight of circumstances) that all things do in fact work together for good (Rom. 8 28) and that God is always working on a bigger scale than appears, and that the end product of God's working is a greater, more gracious, more fruitful and more hopeful situation than at the beginning. This is part of the lesson of Hebrews 11 which makes plain that by faith these heroic men and women were looking to God and looking for something bigger and greater than they had yet known. Paul counselled Philemon to see God's hand in all that had happened, and instead of simply 'reacting', which is the natural but not the Christian thing to do, to see the opening up of a new stage of God's blessing for himself, his converted and restored slave, and the whole church. Without doubt the latter state was going to be better than the former and Paul may very well have had in mind here the rich rejoicing in the Father's house after

the return of the prodigal (Luke 15:11-32). In his reception, restoration and reinstatement to service and honour, a whole new life filled with possibilities had begun. Of course, there will always be the bitter, legalistic elder brother whose narrow concept of duty has little in it of love and grace. But remember Onesimus was no longer merely a slave, he was a member of the household of God (Eph. 2:18- 19) with all the privileges and responsibilities that that state brings.

Wednesday 15th January 15-16

Note carefully that Paul does not say that Onesimus was no longer a slave. He was to be taken back to his job and he was to be treated as a brother in Christ, but not as a full son of the family. There are differences which, if not recognised in the right way, will lead only to familiarity, which breeds contempt not respect and leads to disorder and not peace, There is nothing in this epistle, or anywhere else in the New Testament, that can be used to institute revolution by forced and physical means. Not even in this epistle, written to a specific church situation affecting only believers, does Paul say that slavery in itself is wrong. This reticence is not simply to avoid social disorder, because when Paul spoke out against idolatry he caused a riot and almost a general strike in Ephesus (Acts 19:23ff). It was the abuses of slavery and the dehumanising effect of such abuses on servant and master alike that Paul was striking at. The principles he enunciated here and elsewhere (Eph, 6:5-9; Col. 3:22-4;1) strike the death knell of all institutions and practices which take from men their essential dignity, humanity and their intrinsic value as people. Paul recognised that work is part of the very order of creation (Gen. 1:28; 2:15) and that it is a means of grace in a fallen world (Gen. 3:17-19). He recognised also that both employers and employed are bound by God's laws regarding the patterns of work (Ex. 20:8-11), Work is not a dirty word, nor is there anything sub-Christian in working for another or in having other people working for you, What the Bible does condemn is laziness that lives off others (2 Thess 3:10), especially if it is done under the disguise of 'spirituality'.

Thursday 16th January 15-16

There is nothing sub-Christian in recognising that people are different in physical, mental and spiritual capacity and therefore have different functions. Some hate to have responsibility, usually because they cannot handle it and it costs them too much. Others make an excellent second in- command but would be disastrous as leaders, and it would be wrong to require them to be or do what is not really theirs to be and do. Others again have the capacity to lead and organise work and in so doing become a benefit to others as well as themselves. This service and leadership will always be there by human choice as well as by social necessity but there must, be safeguards. To have too many

'chiefs' and not enough 'Indians' is a prescription for disaster. Or again, if one person, group of people, or race is stronger than another, and uses that strength for selfish advantage so that the weaker is robbed of its dignity and humanity, then the issue will be bitter chaos stretching over generations, as history testifies. At the same time in all relationships, including business ones, we are not allowed to change the rules half way through the game and once agreement has been made as to terms of service there is a moral obligation. Jesus' words in Matt. 20:1-16 are very enlightening. But even when there is an accepting of the system, as both John the Baptist and Paul made plain in Lk. 3:10-14 and 1 Cor. 7:20-24, there is still plenty of room and opportunity to change the system not necessarily by legislation, which is largely impotent in the face of fallen and rebellious human nature, but by the work of grace in human hearts, expressed in the context of relationships by a completely new attitude to people as people, and to life as lived unto God.

Friday 17th January 17-20

It would help our social and political thinking a great deal, and it would thin the fog of much ecclesiastical pronouncement, if we would recognise that it is 'in Christ' that we are 'sons of God' and that distinctions are cancelled out. Things that are natural and possible in Christ are unnatural and impossible in the realm of fallen human nature. This is why the philosophy of humanism is becoming demonstrably untenable because ineffective. In Christ and in the body of Christ which is His church, we are members one of another in such a way that mutual dependence and ministry are inevitable. Read 1 Cor. 12:12ff and thrill to it, especially those whose past experience has demoralised them into a bondage of inferiority. The man or woman in Christ has no inferiority, and no one has the right to treat another in any way that is unworthy in the workaday world. But in these verses Paul is concerned that right relationships should be maintained and should operate within the fellowship of the church where master and slave would now be sitting at the same Lord's Table. There are many dangers here, psychological as well as spiritual. James 2:1-13 indicates that the New Testament church was not unaware of them. Servants might presume on masters who were fellow Christians and expect privileges the rest of the staff did not get. Masters might presume on Christians by paying them less than was right and expecting extras of time and tolerance that others would not stand for. Some who have authority, power and place in the business world take it for granted that they will have the same in church, and some who are held down at work or at home seek to assert themselves in the spiritual realm. The heart is deceitful (Jer, 17:9) and needs the constant correction, instruction and encouragement of the Word of God.

Saturday 18th January 17-20

Here is a clear word as to how we should receive each other in church. Treat others as true partners in the Lord. Receive them just as you would hurry to speak to Paul or to Jesus if they walked in through the door. *They* would not be left to sit in a pew alone, nor to fend for themselves if they had no place to go for lunch, nor would they have to go from group to group hoping someone would speak to them. (Someone had to do that in the church hall in Sandyford the week before this note was written!) It is likely that Paul's urging of Philemon to do the right and gracious thing had more to do with Onesimus' fear and demoralisation than with the master's unwillingness. Perhaps the slave's sense of guilt about his wrongdoing, together with the underlying insecurity and emotional sensitivity resulting from years of being a slave with no real identity or freedom, had made the man so devalued in his own feelings that he just could not believe that restoration and acceptance could ever be his. Such people must be shown that they are cared for by their fellows as well as by God and here is another realm of service for us Sunday by Sunday. Do we not sing in the hymn 'Rescue the perishing' of being 'touched by a loving hand, wakened by kindness.'? This is evangelism by actions of love. We must help one another to believe the love God has for us (1 John 4:16).

Sunday 19th January 17-20

Paul does not ignore the fact that Philemon has been wronged and has possibly lost financially because of his slave's stealing. Justice requires that restitution be made and since a slave was not likely to have any money. Paul pledges himself to discharge the debt. There is something here we need to consider well. Too often when we have wronged someone we make our confession to the Lord and seek His pardon. This is right and proper, but it does not absolve us from making restitution to the person we have wronged so far as it is in our power to do so. For example, if we have told lies about someone behind his back we must not go to *him* and tell him what we have done, for he may know nothing about it and we simply add to the sin and the hurt. We must go to the person to whom we have told the lies and confess what we have done and so seek to quench the stream of untruth against an innocent person. Christianity is very practical. But Paul goes on further. He sets the debt he now owes Philemon over against the debt Philemon owes him, namely his conversion, a spiritual debt that can never really be repaid. Do you think Philemon ever claimed the money from Paul? Some suggest there is a hint here pointing to the parable in Matt. 18:21-35. Certainly in 1 Cor. 9:8-12 Paul makes the principle very clear. There are obligations arising out of spiritual blessing. It seems in v.20 that Paul is really pleading that there will be profit for all concerned if the will of God is done in this matter.

Monday 20th January 21-22

Note Paul's last plea in v.20. Happy are those who have friends in Christ who can indeed refresh their hearts. Is Paul expressing a need here saying that in the midst of demanding service freely given, he longs for some gracious response to his influence, ministry and appeal that will lift him up and send him on his way rejoicing? We assume far too readily that preachers are self-sufficient. They can often be very lonely people who seldom are at the receiving end of encouragement except from the Lord. But Paul does not allow personal matters to divert him from the main spiritual issue in hand.

He expresses confidence in his friend Philemon, and there are two things here that we must note carefully. We must have confidence in those who have proved themselves to be faithful and to hold to that confidence until there are overwhelming grounds for doubting it. If this was done a vast volume of petty criticism would be quenched at source. Too many talebearers have done hellish work with their tongues (Jas. 3: 1-12) and too many people have ears that are only too glad to hear denigrating reports of other people and their work. The second thing is that confidence should be expressed, not only by way of encouragement, but also to inspire and challenge others to rise to their best capacities. Think of how Paul inspired Timothy (2 Tim. 1: 3-8; cf. Phil, 1; 6-8; 1 Thess. 5:23-25, Acts 20:32). Over against that think of how often our words or lack of them have the effect of demoralising people and causing them to be cast down so that they lose heart and settle down into a life far short of what they could be.

Tuesday 21st January 21-22

Paul is not flattering Philemon but is appealing to that generosity of spirit which is the mark of true growth in grace. We all tend to be a bit like the elder brother of the prodigal, carefully exact, doing what is required of us, but never showing that expansiveness of heart that was shown by the Father (Luke 15:20-24). The Lord loves the person who gives of himself cheerfully (2 Cor. 9:7) and such a person will never be straitened or inhibited even though he may at times be taken advantage of (2 Cor. 6:11-12; Prov. 11: 24-25). It is the legalistic man, who is always calculating, always keeping himself clear in terms of the strict requirement of rules, who becomes a Pharisee, preoccupied with the minute details but forgetting the larger issues of love and grace (Matt. 23:23-24). It is not quite clear in this letter just what is the 'more' that Paul expects. Is he really pleading for the slave to be made a free-man rather than just reinstated to his job and former status? If so, this is the nearest Paul comes to making a specific, yet unofficial, move to abolish slavery. Is Paul asking that Onesimus be sent back to him for further Christian service? Whatever the meaning, it is clear that the converted slave is now to be considered and valued as a person in his own right. This does not mean he is free to kick over the traces, to abandon all responsibility, to refuse to work and to indulge in

that form of sheer selfishness that is often mistaken for liberty. He is free to make himself a slave of Jesus Christ, and in Christ to make himself a slave and a servant to all men, as Paul and our Lord Jesus were (1 Cor. 9:19-23; Matt. 20:28), This is the service that is perfect freedom.

Wednesday 22nd January 21-22

There is something sincere and simple about Paul's request that the spare bedroom might be prepared for him. Amongst other things he wants to make it quite plain that he has no desire to create a confrontation situation with his good friend Philemon. He has spoken of 'obedience' (21) which he has an apostolic right to expect, but he does not 'lord it' over his brother. He is appealing, not charging or requiring and, even though the issue of the slave is not settled, Paul still hopes that a long prayed for visit to the home of Philemon will take place. When it does there is to be no atmosphere of tension. At the same time Paul is in no doubt that his visit will be a blessing and a benefit to that household of believers. He says the same kind of thing in Rom. 1:8-15, adding the note of mutual benefit. Paul never thought of himself as self-sufficient. That is one reason why he always appealed for people's prayers, and why he was so willing to make open acknowledgment of the debt he owed to so many. Fellowship is always two sided, and that fellowship is spoken of here in terms of hospitality. This was a very real part of Christian service and fellowship in a day when there was much travel. Paul felt free to ask hospitality and felt sure it would not be denied. Significant references to hospitality are Rom. 12:13; 1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:8; Heb. 13: 2; 1 Pet. 4:9. But there were also safeguards, for it is no part of Christian stewardship and kindness to support and make provision for those who, under the guise of 'living by faith', are simply 'living off' other people. Consider 2 Thess. 3:6-15 and 2 John 10. These are strong words but Christian grace is no charter for laziness. Work is a creation ordinance and a means of grace (Gen. 3:19). In the end no-one 'lives by faith' for all provision is made as the result of hard work on someone's part. We must never take kindness for granted, and gratitude is acceptable to God and to man.

Thursday 23rd January 23-24

Names are fascinating because they remind us that the great characters of Scripture were men and women just like ourselves (Jas. 5:17). We studied recently the list of names in 2 Tim. 4:9-15, 19-21, and there is a list in Col. 4:7-17 very similar to this one. (Those who have followed these notes for a little time will have had a detailed study of most of these names in the Notes on 2 Timothy.) The references to Epaphras are in Col. 1:7 and 4:12 and it seems he was the evangelist to and the founder of the churches in Colossae, Hierapolis and Laodicea. He obviously kept in touch with Paul over a long spell. Aristarchus is spoken of in Acts 19:29; 20:4; and 27:2 as a fellow traveller with

the apostle. In Col. 4:10 he is a fellow prisoner of war and it is suggested by some that he took turns with Epaphras in voluntary imprisonment in order that the apostle might have company, support and assistance. If that be so, these two men give evidence of dedication of an astonishing degree, and we can imagine the tenderness of heart with which Paul would mention their names at the end of this letter to another valued brother and helper. Such was the holy fellowship between these men, and such was their individual and corporate commitment to the cause of Christ, that it is almost inevitable that the Devil must have tried to disrupt their harmony. Think of how in the gospels Peter seemed to envy John's closeness to Jesus and how all the disciples argued about who was 'furthest in' with Jesus (Mark 9:33-35). Sad to say it is not unknown among Christians that they play off one friend against another and this is a sign of deep insecurity. True beneficial closeness between people is possible only to the extent to which these people want to be and keep themselves close to Jesus.

Friday 24th January 25

Paul ends his letter as he began it (3) with a benediction of grace. All is of grace. Our salvation is the work of God's grace and all the progress we have made, all the fruit we may have produced, all the friends we have gained and all the blessings we have received are from God's free and abundant and unailing grace. Consider 1 Cor. 4:6-7; 1 Cor. 3:1-9; 2 Cor. 12:1-10; Eph. 2:4-8; 3:7-8; 4:7; 1 Tim. 1: 12-16; Heb. 4:16; Jas. 4:6; 1 Pet. 3:7; 5:5,10; 2 Pet. 3:18. Take your concordance and look up the lists of references to the grace of God and the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. Then remember that there are 'grace words' that do not contain the word 'grace', for forgiveness, regeneration, repentance and salvation are all involved as is the wonderful thought of the love of God, which is commended to us in the fact that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us (Rom. 5:8). The grace that saved us is the grace that keeps us and also enables us to perform all that we are called to be and do as the children of God. The whole of our story is concerned with 'Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners' (Bunyan), and Paul speaks of it here not just, in terms of Philemon for the word 'your' is plural. It is grace for the whole church in all its life, fellowship and service. It is indeed amazing grace, and having brought us thus far, with many, many blessings, that grace will see us through to the end, to the glory of God.

Daniel

Saturday 25th January 1:1-2

We are given a clear indication of the date of the events of this story; the circumstances and atmosphere in which the story develops; and right from the

start it is made plain that these events were in no way accidental. God was in them. The circumstances of the reign of King Jehoiakim are recorded in 2 Kings 23:36-24:6 and 2 Chronicles 36:5-8. The third year of his reign was 605 BC. Some thirty years previously there had been revival and reformation within the nation of Judah, under the influence of good King Josiah (2 Kings 22-23), but the renewing of the spiritual life of the nation had come too late and did not go deep enough to stop the decline (2 Kings 23:26-27). Things had reached such a point of godlessness that no change of direction was possible. God had spoken His word of judgment. The next king, Jehoahaz, set the pattern of evil and his reign lasted a mere three months (2 Kings 23:31-34), when the nation fell under the sway of Egypt. Jehoiakim then became king, set on the throne by the king of Egypt, and his reign lasted eleven years. He too did evil in the sight of the Lord. In the third year of Jehoiakim's reign, when he tried to assert himself, the king of Babylon came, invaded the land, and besieged Jerusalem. As a result, in the year 605 BC the first batch of Jews was carried away captive to Babylon and among them were Daniel and his friends. A second wave of deportation took place some eight years later and then finally, in 586 BC, Jerusalem was destroyed and the kingdom of Judah ceased to be. The reason for the death of the nation is given in 2 Chron. 36:15-16. The people, favoured so long, spoken to in so many ways by a succession of prophets, and dealt with in such longsuffering patience by God, finally fell because they refused to listen. There is a lesson here for every generation, a lesson expressed solemnly in Hebrews 2:1-4; 4:1-2.

Sunday 26th January 1:1-2

We must be quite clear that the increasing predicament of the nation and its final collapse had a spiritual cause. It was not the result of international politics nor of the interplay of economic forces although these were and always are involved. The key to the situation was the rebuke and disciplinary judgment of God on His own people who had forgotten, denied and refused Him in His every word of warning, instruction and pleading. When they would not listen to God's words, however loudly they were spoken, then they had to listen to and learn from God's disciplines. At a certain point in history God shook this nation by something the people were quite sure would never happen to them. The nation was invaded, the holy city of Jerusalem was breached and the cream of the young people was carried away to live and serve in a pagan country. But even that did not restrain, let alone cure, their spiritual complacency and moral degeneration. Yet at the same time the new era of God's purpose was being prepared for in Babylon, through people such as Daniel, who resolved (1:8), who "purposed in his heart" (AV), that he would be true to God as apparently he had been even in the midst of the spiritual decline of the nation. There came a time when the main exile had taken place that the Jews mourned deeply over what had happened to them.

In Babylon (Psalm 137:1-6) they began to appreciate the spiritual blessings and privileges of being God's people only when all had been lost. But it took then a long time to get back to anything like spiritual health again. The lesson here is clear: spiritual privileges can be taken away from us by God, if that is the only way He can bring us back to Himself. There is another significant element in the background of the story that we must look at tomorrow.

Monday 27th January 1:1-2

To what extent are we able to discern the hand of God in situations that seem at first to be totally negative? We are told that the king of Babylon took the holy vessels from the Temple in Jerusalem and put them into the treasury of his god. He could have destroyed them. But in the providence of God they were preserved safely through all the years of exile and, in due time, by the orders of another pagan emperor, these vessels were released and taken back to Jerusalem. Read the story in Ezra 1:1-11. But there is another evidence of the overruling providence of God preparing the remnant of faith to cope with disaster and to carry the work forward into the future. Read Jeremiah 1:1-12 and see that, at a certain point in the reign of Josiah, Jeremiah's ministry began. That means that for some twenty years before the start of the story of Daniel, Jeremiah's great ministry had been going on. We often speak of Jeremiah having no converts, and certainly his ministry did not stop the rot in the nation. But it may well have been through Jeremiah's ministry that young men such as Daniel learned faith. They must have had a good, solid, comprehensive grounding because, when the time came, these young folk were ready to stand. Evangelically speaking, in our generation we may be failing our young people by feeding them on superficial ministry and by demanding too little of them in terms of commitment in service and especially in prayer. With society developing, as it is, in darkness and decadence, young Christians need to be prepared and trained for war. Who knows but that they may have to face and cope with a Daniel-type situation in which the whole religious and spiritual life of the nation collapses. Daniel and his companions were ready when the challenge came. But spare a thought for Jeremiah who had the experience of what we might call his whole Youth Fellowship being taken away in one sudden crisis. Perhaps it was these young people, and they alone, who had gathered with Jeremiah to pray! Jeremiah's ministry went on for another thirty years and in the end he was taken to Egypt. He never got to go to Babylon where he might have been thrilled to see the long-term fruit of his ministry. Of course, all ministry must be carried out in faith. The results are with God and we must trust without seeing.

Tuesday 28th January 1:3-7

When young believers are moved away from home influence and from their home church it is a time of significant testing for them. They need to be

prayed for because they will face all the pressures of the influence and atmosphere of a world that is far from sympathetic to Christian faith and lifestyle. Daniel and his friends discovered almost at once that the “world” in which they found themselves was not neutral. The battle for their *minds* and their *souls* began in earnest. Their story tells us a great deal about how to live the life of faith in a materialistic, godless environment. A comprehensive process of education and “brainwashing” began and they were brought into the most affluent human situation, the kind of living conditions that many would envy. They were to have everything, and this was the king’s command. The king of Babylon knew exactly what he wanted. He wanted God eliminated from the consciousness of these young men of capacity and potential. They were given Babylonian names in an attempt to blot out from their thinking the fact that they were Jews, members of God’s chosen people. Now, if we forget who we are: men and women who are in Christ and who belong to Christ; if we forget where we have come from, redeemed from brokenness, bondage and death by the costly redemption that is through Christ; and if we forget that we are called to be God’s people and to share His glory, then we will soon lapse into a way of life that has no clear Christian marks to it (Eph. 2:1-7,19; 1 Pet. 1:18-19; 1 Cor. 6: 19-20; 1 Pet. 5:10). The influence of the world will always seek to condition us, and that is why we must have the resolution and the determination to refuse to be squeezed into the world’s pattern of thinking (Rom. 12:1-2). We must keep clearly in our minds that the world is not neutral. Statements of spiritual truth such as those found in 1 John 2:16-17 and 1 John 5:19 have to be taken seriously.

Wednesday 29th January 1:3-7

We cannot live the life of faith by contracting out of the world into some kind of Christian ghetto where we think our spirituality will be safe. We are called to be *in* the world but not *of* it (1 Cor. 7:31) and to shine as lights in a crooked and perverse generation (Phil. 2:14-16). To do this we need to be well taught in the things of God and to be aware of the reality and the carefully planned stratagems of Satan who is the inspiration behind the people, things, activities and influences that are set to take us away from God and to limit, if not to frustrate totally, our service for God. We need to learn to use the armour provided by God and to recognise that we are not battling against mere human influences (Eph. 6:10ff). It seems that right from the start Daniel was aware of what the king was planning. The young people with leadership potential were first subjected to a process of involvement in a particular way of life of which the rich food and wine were but symbols. The objective was to get Daniel’s way of life to be so much like that of a godless Babylonian that people would assume he had abandoned commitment to his God. Think of it this way. From our way of life, our hobbies, pastimes, the things that take prior place in our allocation of time, energy and money, would people realise

that we are Christian believers committed to following Jesus? Along with the pressure for involvement the king instituted a process of education which was simply brainwashing. The course was to last three years and they were to learn the language of Babylon so that their conversation would have nothing of God in it. They were to learn the language of Babylon, the philosophy of paganism and an interpretation of history that was without God and without any element of redemption or eternity. This is exactly the process that is going on in our own generation through newspapers, radio, television and the popular weekly magazines, especially some shocking ones produced for the younger generation. The battle for the minds of people begins in Primary School and the results are seen in the general blasphemy of Christ's name, the absence of standards of morality and of any real sense of right and wrong. The hymn-writer was right on target when he wrote, "Thou art in the midst of foes, watch and pray." Check up on your attitude to life, because that determines your actions.

Thursday 30th January 1:8-16

Here we see both Daniel's resolution of heart and also evidence of the grace of his personality, because the chief steward agreed to his suggestions. We do not know how many took this strong line of faithfulness to God. Perhaps Daniel was criticised for being narrow and extreme and possibly causing the authorities to look with disfavour on all the others. Daniel did not shout or make a fuss; he did not organise a protest march, go on strike, or organise a petition. He simply decided that there was to be nothing between him and God. If God could not bless it, then he did not want to have it. If it was not contributing to his life of faith and obedience then it had no place. If there was a danger that something might take him away from God or compromise his testimony, then he would do without it. No doubt other Jews, including older people, would tell Daniel he would lose friends if he took God as seriously as that, and he would certainly not "get on" in the world. Of course, it depends which world you want to get on in: this temporary world or God's eternal world. Keep in mind the story Jesus told in Lk. 12:13-21 about the man who got on so well that he lost his soul! We can imagine Daniel and his friends praying together about the course of action they were taking, and it must have been a thrill of encouragement when the chief steward agreed with their plan. It is always a thrill when we get indications that God really is with us. The stand they took was costly but these fellows turned out to be the healthiest and happiest humanly and spiritually. The story will go on to tell how Daniel went on like this, growing in grace and fruitful service, till he was an old man. How many Christians are really past their spiritual best by their early twenties or thirties?

Friday 31st January 1:17-21

It had taken only ten days for it to become evident that God was with these young men in a particular way. This is not surprising because God honours those who honour Him (1 Sam. 2:30). That does not necessarily mean that everything works out smoothly because, as the New Testament teaches, there are times when we are given the privilege of suffering for the sake of Christ and the Gospel (Acts 5:40-42). We shall read later how Daniel ended up in the den of lions and his friends experienced the fiery furnace. But the point here is that because these young men stood before God (that was the hidden part of their lives), they ended up standing before the king and finding themselves in significant secular positions of work in a godless society. No doubt those who warned Daniel and his friends that they would not “get on” would then be rather jealous of how well they had got on. People may well have criticised Daniel and his friends for compromising their spiritual identity by associating with and working for a godless king. We do not know how much of Jeremiah’s ministry the young men had known but God certainly made clear to the Jews, in anticipating their going into exile, that they had to accept and come to terms with their new situation, not rebelling against it, but humbling themselves under the mighty hand of God by which they had been led to their new situation. We are told in Jer. 29:1-11 of a letter sent to the exiles some eight years after Daniel went to Babylon, and it may well have been that Jeremiah preached the same wise counsel earlier in his ministry. There are times when we must accept the inevitable, but we accept it in faith, not unbelief; in hope, not in despair; and to co-operate is not necessarily to compromise. Later in the story Daniel was God’s man in God’s place at God’s time. It takes more faith to humble oneself and to wait upon God than to rebel.

Saturday 1st February 1:17-21

Note very carefully the clear emphasis on God’s activity and blessing. The young men prospered in their studies and got a good grasp of Babylonian philosophy, law and administration. They may not have realised just how significant this would prove to be in their lives when their time of study was over. But we are also told of a particular spiritual endowment given to Daniel in respect of visions and dreams. This too was to prove significant in the near future. The next important thing to note is how Daniel and the others excelled in the area of royal advice, and this probably stirred in the Babylonian advisers of the king a resentment against these Jews who were putting their jobs and favoured positions in danger. Success that comes to us because of God’s blessing is not always appreciated by others. Take an example: ministers of the Gospel who refuse the discipline, cost and unpopularity of exercising a thorough expository ministry of the whole Word of God can be critical and jealous to the point of hatred when they see the fruit of such ministry in other

places. In this first chapter of Daniel the main elements of the story have been mapped out. From this point everything flows, and Daniel's ministry went on until the first year of Cyrus (538 BC). That means Daniel's ministry in Babylon lasted sixty-seven years. To be of significant use to God for that length of time you need to be sure of God, sure you are in God's place of appointing, and sure of God's sovereign providence. The foundation for that kind of certainty was laid in the early days of Daniel's life of faith. Too many young people leave it too late before they begin to be serious about God and about their spiritual commitment.

Sunday 2nd February 2:1-11

The events of chapter one are dated in the first year of Nebuchadnezzar's reign and in the following year we have this new story. That means it was not long before Daniel was brought right to the forefront of a critical situation. We begin to see just what a ruthless king this man was. Politically he was powerful in the international situation. In the domestic situation he was a total dictator, wealthy, well fed and normally a good sleeper. Then he began to have a succession of dreams, which seemed to be nightmares, and they troubled him greatly. Part of the problem seems to have been that he could not quite remember just what the dreams were (3-5), and he began to suffer from insomnia, no doubt because he was afraid to go to sleep. He was haunted by his dreams and became increasingly insecure to the point of being quite paranoid (5,9). First he offered bribes, then he uttered threats, but these magicians, enchanters and sorcerers (2), on whom the king had always relied for insights and guidance, were quite powerless in this situation. There is no mention so far of Daniel and his colleagues, whom the king had already found to be more skilled and capable than the others in wisdom and understanding (1:20). Perhaps it was the magicians themselves who had sidelined Daniel and his friends, holding to their position as senior and long-serving officials of the king. We do not need to think these magicians had real powers of insight, nor do we necessarily deny that they had some occult power. Whatever powers or capacities they had were being shown to be totally ineffective and they were forced to admit that there was an area of power, a realm of spiritual reality, that they knew nothing about (11). That God was at work in this situation cannot be doubted even though He is not mentioned until v.18. God's Spirit was at work in the king's dreams, but that does not mean there is spiritual significance in every dream. Some dreams for example are simply the result of wrong food eaten too late at night!

Monday 3rd February 2:12-16

In our land we know nothing of this kind of totalitarian disposing of people who have done no wrong. But in the past our nation has known times like these and today many nations still experience this kind of ruthless political

power and persecution. How we should give thanks to God for Gospel privileges, blessings and heritage! We take too much for granted and that may be an ominous indication of how badly we are prepared for what may yet come. In Daniel's early years he had known the evils of society and had learned the need for authentic as opposed to sentimental faith. How much Daniel knew about the king's dreams and his threats we cannot tell. Perhaps he was taken aback when soldiers came to arrest him along with all the other wise men. But a man who walks with God knows something of the peace of God which passes understanding (Phil. 4:4-7), and we see him here acting with great poise, calm, wisdom and discretion. There was neither panic nor presumption. His first concern was to ascertain the facts of the situation. He wanted to know what he was dealing with. Daniel's character must have been known to the captain of the guard who had to carry out the execution, and Daniel must have built up something of a respectful relationship with the man because he was given the information he needed and also was given time and opportunity to make an appeal to the king. There is a lesson here on how we ought to treat people in the on-going business of life. If we ride roughshod over them, if we ignore them, if we constantly confront them, giving the impression that we prefer to be antagonistic rather than peaceable, then when there is a genuine crisis they are not likely to listen to us or be patient with us. We must build up relationships, not in order to make use of people in due time, but because we give them value as people, even though they may be very different from ourselves. Daniel had access to the king, and the king listened and communicated. Perhaps he just knew Daniel could be trusted.

Tuesday 4th February 2:17-23

Keep in mind that the lives of these four men were in real danger. Daniel was manifestly the leader but he had no wish to be independent. He needed and he wanted the fellowship of his friends to share in bringing this crisis to God in prayer. We spoke yesterday of Daniel's free access into the presence of Nebuchadnezzar and we see today how aware he was that he also had free access into the presence of God. Of course, these young men, busy with high-ranking civil servant posts, had maintained their walk with God and their life of prayer, and without hesitation they took the matter to God. They came boldly to the Throne of Grace (Heb. 4:14-16) and their prayers were answered. Think of the circumstances of this small prayer meeting. The four men faced the fact that they might soon be executed. They had been brought suddenly face to face with evil in a frightening form. But they were also aware of God. Their eyes were on God. Their hope was in God. Looking back over their preservation in the time of exile, their vindication by God in the issue of taking a stand against the food regime (1:8), and their sustaining by God throughout the process of indoctrination, they knew they had good grounds for trusting God. The command always is, "Have faith in God" (Mk. 11:22),

because in all things God is at work in and for those who are His people (Rom. 8:28). Read and savour the doxology of praise and worship that ended the prayer meeting. We are not told how long they prayed. Perhaps they used few words, aware that long prayers can deaden a prayer meeting, especially when the prayer is more a quoting of Scripture than either heart felt worship, thanksgiving or petition.

Wednesday 5th February 2:17-23

There is a book entitled, “Your God is too small” and there is a hymn which begins, “Workman of God, O lose not heart, but learn what God is like.” These thoughts are a good introduction to Daniel’s prayer which we must ponder because our concept of God undergirds and inspires both prayer and life. God is the unchanging God who abides the same yesterday, today and forever. Wisdom belongs to Him and He is never baffled or uncertain, always having the might or power to carry out His purposes. He rules the changing seasons, and it is in His sovereign providence that kings and kingdoms rise and fall. He is the One who enlightens and instructs those who desire to be so enlightened. He brings out into the open deep and mysterious things, and nothing and no one can take refuge in darkness because the dark and the light are alike to Him. Daniel rejoiced in the God of his fathers. Think how we thrill to sing, “Hail, Abraham’s God and mine!” Daniel gives thanks to God for the way in his own life he had been given wisdom and strength to cope and finally he gives thanks for answered prayer. What a God we have! The whole Bible declares again and again that all might, majesty, power and endless praise rightly belong to God. He is the One ever to be worshipped, trusted and adored. He is the God who works all things according to the counsel of His own will (Eph.1:11) and who is able to do exceeding abundantly above all we ask or think (Eph. 3:20-21). We need to learn to thrill more at the thought of the God we have. It is this great and glorious God whose ear is attentive to our prayers and who answers our prayers, although not always as quickly and obviously as He did here for Daniel. But then, Daniel needed an instant answer. It was indeed a matter of life and death.

Thursday 6th February 2:24-30

We see again the quiet composure and wisdom of Daniel in approaching the king through the appropriate channels. Daniel was quite sure, not only that God had given him the interpretation of the dream but that God would have prepared the king to listen. Keep in mind the suspicion and jealousy the other “wise men” had regarding Daniel and note that Daniel made no attempt whatever to score points against them, nor to use the situation to gain favour with or rewards from the king. It must have been a temptation. There always is such temptation in the business and political world to advance our own cause. In answer to his question (26), Daniel did not immediately speak

words of comfort or encouragement to the distraught king. In pastoral counselling we can limit the help given by reassuring a person too soon. Nebuchadnezzar had to be made aware of the fact that he was dealing with God and being dealt with by God. This was not a merely human problem of psychological tensions causing bad dreams. Daniel made plain that this whole situation was far outwith the capacity of mere men, or magicians, or godly prophets. But there is a God in Heaven who speaks and gives indications regarding the future, sometimes pressing in the message by way of dreams even if the recipient is unwilling to remember the dreams. The king was left in no doubt that he was ignorant of and unaware of the God of Heaven, whereas Daniel knew God. It was the future that Nebuchadnezzar was worried about. He was a king of a great and powerful empire, from Egypt to the Euphrates, and most people would think of him as totally secure, with nothing to worry about. But already in the north the kingdom of the Medes and Persians was growing. Thus far they were friendly, but for how long? The king wondered just what might happen and when. The world of international politics is always uncertain and potentially explosive. It is a happy person who knows that God Himself is his or her refuge and strength. That can give deep and dreamless sleep!

Friday 7th February 2:31-35

It is little wonder that a succession of nights with this same dream frightened the life out of the king. Even when he could not sleep his mind was going over and over the elements of the vision (2:28). He had managed to blot out the picture but the disturbing effect remained. When Daniel began to tell the king what he had seen in his dream there was a great, self-effacing spirit manifest. It was as if God's servant was saying, "Don't think about me. Think about God." The dream had to do with kingdoms as Daniel would go on to explain. But first we have to note the decreasing value of the metal components: gold, silver, bronze, iron and finally feet of clay. The whole structure of the image was impressive and frightening but it had feet of clay. Then there was the stone cut by no human hand, a power outside human experience, capacity, achievement or control. This stone smote the image of the kingdoms of the world, crushing them to dust which was whisked away by the wind. Then the stone, which spoke of a kingdom other than a human kingdom, grew and became a world-filling mountain. It is not hard to see in all this that the decisive power in world history does not lie in the hands and in the control of any worldly kingdom, no matter how great or glamorous it may be. Power belongs to God and to God alone. Sometimes human kingdoms rise to great heights of culture and achievement. Sometimes kingdoms degenerate into gross sensuality and moral perversity as described for example in Rom. 1:21-32. But it is God who decides their limits and God who brings them to judgment. Read Psalm 2. Read also 2 Thess. 2:1-10, where

the frightening rise of evil lawlessness is dealt with by the breath of God's mouth. Human nature can be so proud of and assured in its achievements. But the truth is, "Our little systems have their day; they have their day and cease to be." (Tennyson)

Saturday 8th February 2:36-45

We see great confidence in Daniel as he begins to explain to the king the meaning of the dream. Keep in mind that he had already set the whole issue in a spiritual context in relation to the God of Heaven (28), the God Nebuchadnezzar did not believe in. It had been made clear to the king that God had been speaking to him and that he had failed to recognise this and had failed to understand and respond. The king was being made aware that there was a God with whom he had to deal (Heb. 4:13) and, although he was a great man with a vast powerful empire he was deeply worried. He had been told what his dream was and, no doubt, it all came flooding back with brilliant recollection, increasing his agitation. Consider v.36 and the statement "we will tell the king" . Standing before this mighty king, feared by the nations because of his power, we see a group of four young men, for whom Daniel was spokesman. Daniel had taken with him his faithful "prayer partners" (2:17-18). We should not think of this public prominence as a reward to the friends for their spiritual faithfulness but rather see an indication of the humanity of Daniel, servant of God, called to take such a prominent role. No one knew how the king would react to the interpretation of the dream. His power was total, and he might well have reacted in rage and had the man of God imprisoned or executed. We have examples of this kind of reaction later in the stories of the fiery furnace and the den of lions. Daniel needed human support as he carried out God's commission, and his friends did not fail him. Think how Moses needed the physical presence and spiritual support of his partners in the work of intercession when spiritual battles were being fought and won (Exod. 17:8-13). Think also of how our Lord Jesus Christ took His three close friends into His confidence in Gethsemane, asking them to watch with Him so that, even in the work that only He could do, He would not be totally alone in a human sense. His friends let Him down. Daniel's friends stood with him. They did not stay at home to pray.

Sunday 9th February 2:36-45

Daniel's words in v.37-38 were a true description of the power and the glory of the Babylonian empire. The king's triumphs were known and acknowledged by enemies as well as friends. But Nebuchadnezzar had to be told that this mighty achievement was not his own. It had been given him by God. That truth may not have registered immediately because for the king, as for many, the idea of "God" was a rather vague one - "Somebody up there likes me." The statement, "You are the head of gold" would have appealed to

the king. Babylon was indeed magnificent. Right through the Bible, from the story of the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11:1-9 to the references in Revelation 18:1-3, Babylon has represented the world kingdom of Antichrist. Its evil nature, inspiration, and objective were not always evident and not necessarily crude and cruel. Evil can be magnificent in culture, economics, science, literature and achievement. But greatness, if not yielded in submission to God, has no permanence. This was made devastatingly plain to Nebuchadnezzar in the words, "After you shall arise another kingdom" (39). After that there would be a third kingdom and after that a fourth. The king was made aware of the relentless rolling forward of history and the picture was of a process of degeneration: gold, silver, bronze, iron, clay. The successive empires might grow in terms of the spread of their territory, as indeed they did, but all of them were doomed to fall before, and give way to, the kingdom that is the work of God. We really have here a marvellous picture of the sure and sovereign providence of God ruling over, directing and controlling the whole course of world history. When we see kingdoms rising and falling, some rising with terrifying power and cruelty, and some falling with a rapidity and a disintegration that makes us gasp, we need to remind ourselves for our comfort and encouragement that power belongs to God and to God alone (Ps. 62:11 AV).

Monday 10th February 2:36-45

As he listened to Daniel, the king may well have been thinking that his power had crushed and humiliated the proud nation of Judah, the people who had always boasted that they were God's chosen people. What he did not recognise was that he was being used as God's instrument to discipline God's people; to restrict them so that their sins and idolatry could do no more harm to God's name and God's work; and to refine them, purging idolatry from their system, so that a future generation could again carry forward God's purposes of salvation. When Babylon's empire had fulfilled that purpose it would no longer be relevant and would pass into obscurity. At this stage the identities of the succeeding kingdoms were not given and, while we may speculate, we must not be distracted. Nor must we ever try to work out a detailed timetable for the fulfilment of biblical prophecies. The words spoken by Jesus during His earthly ministry and spoken also after His resurrection and before His ascension should provide sufficient caution (Mk. 13:28-33; Acts 1:7). However, various commentators point out that when Daniel was speaking, the rising power of the Medes and Persians was seen as a possible threat to the dominance of Babylon. The Greeks were a crowd of warring factions, yet to grow into a great power. Rome was then just a village on the River Tiber but would become a mighty world power in the time of our Lord Jesus Christ. As time passed these empires emerged, took their power for a season and then passed away. They seemed permanent but it was not so.

Some who read these notes recall the days of Hitler's Third Reich, which boasted it would last a thousand years. It damaged the world, but it is gone. The Colossus of atheistic Communism which terrorised the world has disintegrated since the Berlin Wall came tumbling down. What of the power of militant Islam? What of the power of Materialism? What of the ravaging kingdom of sensuality? All that is contrary to God must fall under the judgment of God. Power does belong to God alone.

Tuesday 11th February 2:36-45

Focus now on v.44-45 and the theme of God setting up His kingdom which shall stand forever. Of course, a kingdom has a king, and we could well think of the King of Kings riding into Jerusalem to set in motion the process which; in the Cross, would finally conquer the whole world kingdom of evil (Mk. 10:32-34; 11:1-10). The earthly story of that King is set in the context of the phrase in our passage "in the time of those kings" (44), and we have a similar indication of historical context in Lk. 2:1-2; 3:1-2. If we then read Gal. 4:4 we are again brought to see the exact timing and perfect administration of God. We must not ever lose this sense of the sureness of God and the sureness of the issues, even when, as far as we can see, the powers and kingdoms of evil seem to be carrying everything before them. Today's verses make plain that the kingdom of God and all its work are in God's good hand and will never be in the hands of anyone else. Nebuchadnezzar was being shown in no uncertain terms that the powers of the world, in their human and devilish forms, cannot stand against the will, purpose and plan of God. Jesus made it perfectly clear to His disciples, for their encouragement, that He would build His church and the gates of Hell would not and could not prevail (Matt. 16:18). We must never think of God's church as being on the defensive. However much churches and denominations are rocked back on their heels by the pressures of finance and unbelief, God's church goes forward and all the powers of evil cannot stop it. This is what Nebuchadnezzar was being taught. But, was he learning?

Wednesday 12th February 2:46-49

Nebuchadnezzar's immediate reaction seemed to indicate an acceptance of the message of the dream and an attitude of repentance towards God. But first impressions are often deceptive and in the next chapter we see the king reverting to his former arrogant self-confidence. That the king got a severe fright is beyond question but that is not the same as coming to faith in God. In a sense, in the succession of dreams and the interpretation given by Daniel, Nebuchadnezzar had a religious experience that moved him quite deeply but which did not capture his will or change his attitude to life. In his offering of incense to Daniel (possibly equivalent to a mention in the "Honours List") and in his reference to Daniel's God as "God of gods" , the king was showing

his continuing ignorance of the one true God. He was honouring Daniel's God with a place among the respected gods of Babylon. His reaction to the interpretation of his dreams was one of impulse, and was essentially emotional rather than spiritual, but at least it caused him to think about God. That can be the start of something more significant. But events will soon show that the king very quickly forgot his dreams, his fright, and his sudden bout of spirituality. But then, we all tend to do that. Something shakes us, and our prayer life bursts into activity. Then when the emergency is over, we can so easily forget God. We need to make sure we are truly listening, believing and responding when God speaks to us; as He is always speaking when we meet for worship, when we hear His Word and when He deals with us in our circumstances. Daniel was not distracted by the king's apparent "conversion". He kept his head cool and clear, and when he was given a place of political administration he not only saw the hand of God in this, he saw the need for continuing help and support and he asked for his three friends to be appointed as his colleagues. Daniel was the kind of believer who thought things through clearly, and was immensely practical.

Thursday 13th February 3:1-7

We raised the question as to what extent or on what level Nebuchadnezzar was impressed and moved by the interpretation of his dream, and we have now a clear indication of the answer. The king had listened but he had heard only what he wanted to hear, or at least he remembered, as many people tend to do, the part of the "sermon" that appealed to him. After all, Daniel had said, from his God, that Nebuchadnezzar was the head of gold in the marvellous image (2:38). That was something the king wanted everybody to see and to acknowledge. This golden image was an expression of the total, self-centred, self-idolising pride of a ruthless man. It was a celebration of who he was (or thought himself to be) and an expression of what he had accomplished as a significant world figure, even though he had been told in clearest terms that his position and power were his only by the providence of God and for the purposes of God (2:37). But now, in complete contrast to his apparent worship at the end of the previous chapter, we see that God was not in all his thoughts (Ps. 10:4 AV). Right through today's verses, and beyond in v.12,14, there is the emphasis on the idol Nebuchadnezzar had set up, and the whole country was called to see, to acknowledge and to worship this man. No dissent was to be allowed and any hesitation about bowing down was to be regarded as total treason and would be punished by hideous death. This is the spirit of totalitarianism. All must bow to the State, or to the Party, or to the Peer Group, or to Social Convention, or to the Trade Union, or to the manipulative friend, or to the demanding partner or parent. Failure to bow brings out the ruthless reaction. It is often a deep-seated insecurity that causes people to act in this way and to

demand evidences of love and loyalty that are totally unreasonable, and will never be enough.

Friday 14th February 3:8-12

We spoke earlier (in the notes on 1:17-21) of how jealousy and resentment would have stirred in the hearts of many because of the favours shown to Daniel and his friends, and that jealousy would have increased because of the success of the Jews and their promotion, recorded in 2:46-49. We cannot tell how long had passed since the beginning of the story of Daniel, nor how many years may have elapsed between Chapters 2 and 3, but some people can nurse their anger and resentment for a long time, waiting for the opportunity to strike. The opportunity came in this scheme by the king to institute one compulsory form of religion for the whole nation. It was a plan of “brain-washing” similar to that in 1:3-5. People ambitious for power do not want people to have the freedom to think or act, and therefore a system of control is devised. Certain Chaldeans took note that certain Jews were not present at the “worship” of v.7. Note the phrase “some astrologers”. The accusers would be known, although not named. Their actions were deliberate, their intentions were malicious and they named the three Jews. They may not have had much love for Nebuchadnezzar or respect for his policies, but their hatred for these Jews was dominant. It is interesting that there is no mention of Daniel, only of his three friends. Perhaps they calculated that it was not yet “safe” to accuse Daniel who, after all, was the undoubted leader of the group, their example and their inspiration. Perhaps the clever plan was to bring down the lesser men and in that way discredit the leader and accomplish his downfall. The same technique is adopted by those who refuse the Gospel and the authority of Scripture. They seldom come out into the open and declare themselves unbelievers. They prefer to criticise, as extreme and unbalanced, those who stand by the faith once delivered to the saints (Jude 3). The Devil is boringly the same in his devices. It is strange that we are so often taken in by him.

Saturday 15th February 3:13-15

Keep in mind that we are dealing with a ferocious attack by an evil and powerful man against the people and work of God. The furious rage of the king is typical of proud people who feel their power is threatened whenever they are disobeyed or contradicted. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, who held prominent positions in the king’s administration, must have had a great sense of evil and of crisis when they were hauled before Nebuchadnezzar. This situation was not simply one of the “fiery darts” from the evil one (Eph. 6:16) but rather an example of Satan as a roaring lion (1 Pet. 5:8). The question in v.14 “Is it true?” may indicate that, by the time the three men were actually before him, the king had calmed down a bit and was wondering if these men

who had proved their trustworthiness really were guilty. On the other hand he may have been asking if this decision they had made was deliberate, decisive, or open to adjustment. The king's threats were real: not just of losing their jobs but their lives. The religious setting of the challenge and the powerful conditioning of the music must have heightened the sense of evil and of crisis. Possibly Nebuchadnezzar, believing that every man has his price, felt fairly sure that the three men would back down and that he would not have to carry out his threat and so lose good civil servants whom he knew he could trust in a way that he could not trust others. But the threat was there and it was public. The threat of the unbelieving world is always the same: "Toe the line, or you are out." The encouraging call of God's Word is always, "Be not conformed to this world . . ." (Rom. 12:1-2).

Sunday 16th February 3:16-18

The message here is simply that we have good cause and every ground for trusting absolutely the God who for love of us and our salvation spared not even His own Son but delivered Him up to the Cross (Rom. 5:6-11; 8:31-39). Whatever fires of experience we may be called on to go through, there will be with us the One who went through the deepest of fires when He took our sins in His own body on the Cross and paid their price so that we might be forgiven (1 Pet. 1:18; 2:24). Today's verses are of deep emotional and spiritual significance to the writer of these notes. They were the text given by God for the first sermon I preached in Sandyford after my Induction in October 1956. Facing an unknown future and aware of both the difficulties and the demands of the situation I had been called to, the affirmation, "Our God is able" was comfort and encouragement and has proved to be a sure rock to stand on down through the years. The study of these verses as part of the story we leave until tomorrow. Consider the wondrous Cross on which the Prince of Glory died; remember that it was God Himself who laid on the Saviour the iniquity of us all (Isa. 53:4-6). Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all. That is exactly how the young men felt in the face of the king's threat. They were God's men and their God was able to deliver. He is able to save to the uttermost (Heb. 7:25 AV); able to do exceeding abundantly above all we ask or think (Eph. 3:20); able to make all grace abound (2 Cor. 9:8); able to subdue all things to Himself (Phil. 3:21); able to help those who are tempted (Heb. 2:18); and able to keep us from falling and to present us faultless in His presence with joy, for Him and for us (Jude 24). Our God is able. Why should we doubt or fear?

Monday 17th February 3:16-18

The three young men faced a great challenge. They could have conformed to an "inevitable" situation, saying that God knew their hearts were true and that this "ceremony" really meant nothing. But, of course, their

testimony and their witness would have been compromised. Although it is not stated, there are grounds for believing that many, perhaps most, of the Jewish exiles conformed for the sake of their lives and their families. There are times when we have to yield and submit, even though we will be misunderstood and criticised, but there are times when we must stand our ground regardless of the cost. These young men stood and affirmed that their God was able to deliver them, and that their first loyalty was to their God not to Nebuchadnezzar. They went further, affirming their faith that God would in fact deliver them from the fire and from the power of the king. But then they added the words “But if not . . .” Was that a weakening of their faith? Was it doubt creeping in? Was it a case of “hedging their bets” in case their prayers were not answered? It was none of these things. It was in fact their faith stating with clarity and humility that even the strongest faith does not know always and in detail just exactly how God will act. After all, God’s ways are higher and better and surer than ours (Isa. 55:8-9). Faith will never assume it knows all that God is doing and will do in any given situation. That would be to live and walk by sight not by faith. And, if we did know all in detail, then there would be no need for faith. Faith will never presume it knows exactly how God will work. God does indeed move in mysterious ways His wonders to perform, and His ways are indeed past finding out (Rom.11:33). These young men of faith declared that they were sure of God for the present and the future and, however things did work out, they would trust God and leave the issues to Him.

Tuesday 18th February 3:19-25

The quiet but assured faith of the young men and their manifest courage in refusing to yield to his threats enraged Nebuchadnezzar. It is quite amazing just how often this king lost his temper. He must have been basically very insecure! The extremity of the king’s anger is an indication that there was something demonic or devilish about his reaction against manifest faith in God. This is something that we must be prepared for, especially as our own generation becomes more and more godless and blasphemous. After all, Jesus warned His disciples that faith and obedience in the world would meet with tribulation. Of course, He also made plain that He had overcome the world and all its powers (Jn. 16:33). Try to imagine the thoughts and feelings of these three men as they were led to the blazing furnace. They were in exile and had been away from their spiritual home in Jerusalem for quite a number of years. But they had sought out each other, stuck together and prayed together. That is an important attitude to life when you find yourself in a new and different society, especially where there is indifference and opposition to the things of God. This is why every Sunday and every Prayer Meeting is so important. None of us know when we will have to live without these supports, protections and encouragements. They had known the temptation

to compromise but they had stood out against it. What were they thinking now? Had they regrets about taking such a clear stand for God? No! They were ready. What were they thinking? They would be sure that Daniel, and perhaps others they knew nothing about, would be praying. What a comfort it is to have a praying church behind you in a crisis (Acts 12:1-16). Perhaps these men, grounded in Scripture, were thinking of and holding fast to God's promise in Isaiah 43:1-2. There are all sorts of fiery trials to go through and we are told in 1 Pet. 4:12-19 not to be taken by surprise but to entrust ourselves to God.

Wednesday 19th February 3:19-25

It seems very likely that these three men of faith are the ones referred to in Heb. 11:34. The story makes plain that Nebuchadnezzar was astonished and agitated by what happened but there is no indication that the three men were perturbed at all. Indeed in the midst of the fire they are seen free from their bonds and enjoying safe and sweet fellowship with a man whom the king described as a son of the gods. These three men had served God, not just believed in Him, in their ordinary lives. God had trusted them to go into the fire, and now they found that their God had come to them to stand with them in the midst of the flames. Some commentators see a parable in this story, showing how the men were set free from their bonds in and by the fire. The Psalmist speaks of sore affliction in this way in Ps. 119:67,71. Nebuchadnezzar no doubt believed in many different gods and at one stage was glad to add Daniel's God to their company. But he had no understanding at all of a God who cares so much for His people and values them so highly that he is prepared to come down to them in even the most adverse circumstances. But this is the glory of the Christian Gospel. The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us (John 1:14). And Jesus promised to be with His disciples all the time, in all places, and for ever. However much the king knew or understood about God the fact that his evil murderous scheme had been frustrated made it very plain that he had gone against this God. He had fought against God, and had lost (Acts 5:38-39). Find a hymn book and read the hymn that begins, "How firm a foundation, ye saints of the Lord, is laid for your faith in His excellent word" .

Thursday 20th February 3:26-30

As a punishment for standing against his express commands the king had ordered these three men to be executed by cremation but there had been miraculous intervention by God. It was the king himself who called on the men to come out from the furnace. He was quite sure they were still alive, and they came out as they had gone in, dressed for the occasion as if they had been going to a celebration (21). It was a perfect deliverance, not a narrow escape. God who was indeed able, had delivered them. The king was mightily

impressed by the miraculous event and reacted accordingly with all sorts of promises. Of course we have seen already that Nebuchadnezzar was fickle with his promises and his high and holy thoughts were not likely to last very long. It is a phenomenon we still see, for example, in pressurised evangelism where the thrill and the emotion of the moment causes some people to make all sorts of decisions. But real faith is to be tested and proved in the cold light of ordinary days and circumstances. The king seems to have acknowledged publicly that the God of these young men had countermanded him. He did not react in anger but issued a decree which, at least for a season, gave the people and work of God's kingdom a real protection. There was the usual ferocity in the king's warnings (29), and extreme fluctuations of attitudes, actions and words are never a good sign. There was no indication that Nebuchadnezzar wanted to learn more about God, no indication of a personal repentance about what he had done so ruthlessly, nor any softening of heart. He did what came naturally to him: he promoted Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego and this, no doubt, increased the anger and jealousy of those who resented the presence of men of faith in their society. We can be quite sure there was great thanksgiving among the faithful, praying people of God in Babylon. No doubt there were also those Jews who felt that this kind of taking a stand for God so publicly was simply going to make life harder for them. Attitudes and reactions are often a good indication of whether we are going with God or against Him.

Friday 21st February 4:1-3

Nebuchadnezzar ruled Babylon for forty-three years and it was about half way through his reign that the final exile of the Jews took place. By that time Daniel had been in Babylon for eighteen years. That means we must keep in mind, as we read these stories, that a considerable spell of time is involved. It is difficult to pinpoint the dates of specific events, and we know little about the second half of Nebuchadnezzar's reign. We do not know when the madness spoken of in this chapter (4:16) took place or how long the "seven times" lasted, whether it was weeks, months or years. We do not know if the great pronouncement of today's verses came right after the events of the previous chapter or after some years. Clearly the witness of Daniel and his friends, and the signal deliverance of the young men from the fiery furnace, had made an impression on the king, and at first it seemed to have been a profound impression. He had been in contact with and involved in a manifestation of God's mighty, saving and delivering power. There was no way he could deny the miracle. Nebuchadnezzar spoke with sound words and uttered profound theological truth about God. But not all who speak true religious words are right with God. Jesus made that very plain in Matt. 7:21-23. A careful reading of today's verses reveals a man who was very aware of himself, his position and his importance. He made the signs and wonders of

God place him in a very good light, forgetting that most, if not all, of God's dealings with him were in terms of rebuke and humbling. But the king spoke truth that we all need to grasp for our comfort and encouragement. God's kingdom is indeed everlasting, from generation to generation. Nothing can shake, hinder or contradict it. God does indeed cause His will to be done on earth even as it is in Heaven. This is fact, not a pious hope.

Saturday 22nd February 4:4-12

There is an amazing contrast between v.4 and 5. Nebuchadnezzar felt totally secure, at the peak of his power, with no political or economic worries. He was at ease at home, and he was prospering. But life can be very uncertain and he had a dream which made him afraid and caused him great alarm. He still felt himself to be in a position to handle the situation and his decree summoned all his magicians and astrologers. There was no sign of his turning to the great and Most High God whom he had spoken of in v.1-3. His "impressions" of God had not broken him away from his earlier, godless superstitious attitude to life. It seems to have been as a last resort that he called Daniel into his presence. He referred to Daniel by the pagan name he had been given, named after the idol god that really was the basic "faith" of the king. Describing Daniel as a man in whom "the spirit of the holy gods" dwelt makes plain that Nebuchadnezzar had learned very little about the truth of the God of salvation. He had learned some of the religious language and he had been impressed by the character, integrity and capacity of some of the believers in the God of salvation, but that is not the same as coming to faith. This is what happens to some people from a worldly background who start coming to a biblical and evangelical church. They "fit in" and enjoy the experience but, when a crisis comes, their reaction, expressed in words, makes plain they are nowhere near real faith. Their speech betrays them. Read v.9 carefully. If the king had this kind of regard for Daniel, who had interpreted his previous dreams, why was he so long in seeking his spiritual help? Sometimes our true spiritual and moral condition is revealed by the kind of people we go to for help. Many people would rather have a worldly answer to their fears and problems than a Christian and a spiritual answer. If we trust someone's person, integrity and spiritual ministry, why do we not seek their help?

Sunday 23rd February 4:13-18

Read in from v.10 and try to picture the tree Nebuchadnezzar saw in his dream. It was glorious, expansive, reaching to heaven, seen and admired to the ends of the earth, and it was the source of blessing to the human and animal kingdom alike. We can imagine the king enjoying the start of the dream because he would think it was a symbol of his person and his great empire. Then the dream began to go wrong in a most alarming way. There

appeared a watcher, a holy messenger from Heaven, someone who had obviously been scrutinising the whole progress of Babylon's rise to power and the exercise of that power. The thought of God watching can be alarming or very comforting, depending on whether or not we are doing right by God. The eyes of the Lord range throughout the earth (2 Chron. 16:9), and at times the Lord comes down to the dark streets of "sin-city" to investigate and to deal with wrong (Gen. 18:20-21). In the dream the heavenly messenger cried aloud, obviously in rebuke, and instigated a process of stripping down the tree. Poor Nebuchadnezzar was seeing what he thought was his fine achievement torn down. The stump of the tree was to be left, indicating that there was hope of a new life to come. Then in v.15 there is reference to a band of iron, and at once it becomes clear that the dream was indicating a person to whom devastating and humiliating things were to happen. The man was going to be bound or shackled by a dreadful breakdown in which he would live and act like a beast. Little wonder the king was terrified. We too are solemnised. But we must remember that the king had often acted like a savage, ravenous, ruthless beast in relation to the people of God and to many others. This man needed to be humbled and, having been deaf to what God had been saying to him, God now had to speak very loudly.

Monday 24th February 4:13-18

We must grasp clearly and surely the truth of v.17 in order that we might see the purpose of God in His dealings with Nebuchadnezzar, and that we might be deeply reassured by the truth of God's sovereign power over the rise and fall of kingdoms and empires. The following verse (18) makes plain that the king was somehow deeply persuaded that this vivid and disturbing dream had a message that came from "above", from "heaven", and that it had great significance concerning his person and his future. Now, it is important to be aware that God does speak to us significantly regarding our lives and our careers. Both when we are gathered for worship, sitting under the preaching of God's Word, and also when we are reading our Bibles and praying at home, we must be "tuned in" to God. At the same time we must be very wary of "sudden" messages, impulsive decisions and changes of direction, especially if these changes are radical. There is an enemy who always seeks either to lead us astray or to hold us back from obedience. There is wisdom and safety in doing what the king did. He sought the advice and guidance of a man whose spiritual wisdom and integrity had been proved and demonstrated. Seeking advice and clearer understanding is not a denial of spirituality but rather a confirmation of it. If the advice confirms what we ourselves have been thinking, then that is safety. If the advice runs contrary to what we have been thinking and feeling, so that we think and pray again, that too is safety. To a man very aware of his power and position and achievements the statement in v.17 must have been searching and disturbing,

not least the phrase “the lowliest of men”. Place, power, prominence and success, as the world measures success, are not necessarily any proof of quality. It is all too easy to become over aware of our personal achievements and we need to remember that, but for the grace of God, things might have been very, very different.

Tuesday 25th February 4:13-18

Following the closing comment of yesterday’s note we do well to read the story Jesus told of the man who by his own efforts, had made a great success of his life, as he thought. In Lk. 12:13-21 it is made plain that the man’s calculations had been made on a totally false basis. Again, when we begin to think too much about ourselves and our achievements we need to remember that this “self” spirit is like that of Satan himself (Isaiah 14:12-15). We need to be reminded that power, and the administration of it, belong to God and to God alone (Ps. 62:11AV). God not only allows the rise of evil powers, He causes both the rise and the fall of earthly powers and He works His sovereign will in and through the fluctuations of history. Nebuchadnezzar’s power held the world in awe and fear but it did not cause God any concern at all. The king had no real permanence, no matter what seemed to be. The dream spoke of the stripping away of his glory, the radical changing of his circumstances, the disintegration of his health and personality, and his total humbling. We sing too lightly at times, “Fading is the worldling’s pleasure, all his boasted pomp and show.” (Newton). Apart from having our lives hid with Christ in God (Col. 3:1-4) we have nothing that is sure. There is a message in this dream to all who in any way bear rule and authority in the affairs of the world and the church. The mightiest structures built independently of God have no foundation and will collapse like a pack of cards when God sees they have served their purpose, which spiritual purpose people may never be aware of at the beginning or the end. But there is wonderful comfort here for those who look to God in faith and who seek to live their lives to please Him. There is no need to fear worldly power, no matter how vast and evil it seems or operates. God rules, and His will is being done on earth as it is in Heaven. It cannot be otherwise, and both time and eternity will reveal it to be so.

Wednesday 26th February 4:19-27

There are similarities and differences in the two men of our story, Nebuchadnezzar and Daniel. In relation to this dream, both men were disturbed and dismayed (5, 19), but not in the same way. Both men had a sense of awe because they knew they were in a situation being dealt with by God. The king was worried in a worldly, carnal, self-interested way, but Daniel was dismayed because he was aware he was God’s messenger in a solemn and significant issue. We have emphasised Daniel’s godliness, spiritual calibre, trustworthiness and obedience to God but he was still human. It was

not easy for him. He did not take spiritual service “in his stride”, but knew the sense of weakness and trembling that Paul spoke of in his letters to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 2:1-5; 2 Cor. 2:15-16). Daniel was perplexed for a long time (RSV), for a time (NIV), for one hour (AV). It seems the understanding of the dream did not come immediately and his burden of heart became evident to the king. Who can ever tell what costly exercise of heart is experienced by those who must speak God’s Word, especially when it is a solemn word? Perhaps this is one reason why some ministers evade the sobering elements of the Gospel message and never in fact speak of judgment. But faithfulness to God and to people means we must keep back nothing that is profitable and needful (Acts 20:20, 27). At first the king was confident, to the point of complacency, seemingly having no suspicion of what was being spoken to him by God. This insensitivity to the voice of God is something that can creep in upon us even when, or especially when, we are accustomed to hearing God’s word preached, expounded and applied. If we do not respond with the obedience of faith the whole message of the Word begins to register less and less (Heb. 2:1-4; 3:12-15; 4:1-2). The king had taken little real notice of what God had been saying to him in past years. Make sure you are listening to God, and answering.

Thursday 27th February 4:19-27

In v.19 Daniel’s answer to the king was a preparation for bad news. He wished the message applied to the king’s enemies, not to the king. The details of description are slightly fewer than in the king’s account but v.22 indicates that Nebuchadnezzar had reached the zenith of his power. Controlling the eastern end of the Mediterranean, Asia Minor, sweeping down to the Persian Gulf and round again to Egypt, he was indeed mighty. But the king was reminded that behind the earthly scene there is another, spiritual kingdom whose servants are active to carry out the will of the God whose power is limitless and whose government is perfect in righteousness. This is something we forget. We sing sometimes of the hosts of God that camp round the dwellings of the just, but in practice we often forget and we act as if we alone were active in doing and defending the work of God. Ponder such references as 2 Kings 6:11-17; Zech. 6:1-7; Judges 5:19-20; Heb. 1:13-14; Ps. 34:7; 91:11; Dan. 6:22; 7:9-10. Think of the words of Jesus as He faced the evil crowd who had come to arrest Him in order to kill Him. One of the disciples lashed out in a mixture of fear and love but Jesus pointed out that there was an army of angels close at hand, ready to be commanded (Matt. 26:51-54). It is difficult to be dogmatic about the exact nature of the collapse or disintegration of Nebuchadnezzar, his “breakdown”, or about the length of time involved. In v.25 “driven from among people” could indicate that the public would know nothing of the king’s apparent insanity and that his strange behaviour would be seen only by those who guarded and looked after him. There was no

suggestion of any political “coup” to steal his power. And, since v.26-27 indicate the possibility of recovery and restoration, perhaps we should think of the gracious kindness of God in allowing this dark experience of the discipline of a proud, bad man, to be in private. God humbles, but He does not go in for humiliation.

Friday 28th February 4:19-27

One of the astonishing things in the Bible is to see the longsuffering patience of God with the wickedness of sinners, and to ponder the lengths to which God will go to bring the sinner to repentance (Rom. 2:4; 2 Pet. 3:9). In v.26 it was made plain to the king that there was indeed hope for his future, provided this dream and its message convinced him that Heaven rules. He had to be persuaded about the absolute sovereignty of God and the need to humble himself under the mighty hand of God (1 Pet. 5:6). Of course, it is vital for all of us to remember that there is a God with whom we have to deal and to whom we must give account. Daniel’s appeal, made in God’s name, in v.27 makes plain that what is called for is not simply assent to a sound, biblical statement of doctrine. Faith that is true, that humbles the heart before God, is essentially practical and the king was called on to break off from his sinful way of life and to show righteousness and mercy in all his dealings with people in the future. This was quite a challenge to a man who had been notoriously cruel, self-willed and heartless in his military conquests. But it is a change in the way of life that authenticates a professed conversion. One last thing we must note carefully is in Daniel’s words that there may still be prosperity in the future (cf. Amos 5:14-15). We must not *assume* that God will forgive and restore. We must never presume upon God’s love and mercy. His forgiveness is astonishing, as Isaiah 1:18 makes plain. That there is forgiveness to those who repent at the last desperate moment after an evil life is clear from the story of the dying thief (Lk. 23:39-43). But there is such a thing as passing “beyond redemption”, with the call of mercy so often refused that it is no longer heard. But even within forgiveness there is the possibility of being laid aside as of no further use in God’s service (1 Cor. 9:24-27).

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