

Salt and Light: The Dream of Nebuchadnezzar

Daniel 2:1-49

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If you have your Bibles, I would invite you to turn with me to Daniel, chapter 2. Last week we commented on the context of the book of Daniel. We said that the book was set during the Babylonian exile of Judah. Jerusalem had been carried into Babylon as a punishment for sin, for rebellion against God. She had turned her back on her covenant God and she had been carried away into captivity. And so the book of Daniel gives us a picture of the captivity of Israel and it gives us about a 70-year slice of the life of Daniel. And we said also that we found in this book a distinctively God-centered view of history. Daniel sees the actions and stage of world history as a stage on which God is acting. We also said that the book of Daniel is a piece of resistance literature. It's designed to help the people of God living in a world that's in opposition to them. The book first of all calls us to perseverance. It tells us don't give up. In the midst of a hostile world, don't give up. It calls us to faithfulness. To stand firm, even though we dwell within a culture that is different from our own, a culture that holds values radically different from our own, we should stand firm. And of course the book also contains the message of hope because it sets forth for us God's judgment on the kingdoms of this world. As we said last week our approach all along will be to get the big picture of this book. There are lots of little details to get tangled up in the book of Daniel, but we will try and see the big picture. And as we said last week, the central question of this book is how can a Christian sing the Lord's song in a strange land. And that's a question that's relevant to all of us, for though we live most of us in the land of our birth, it seems like a strange land in comparison to the land that we knew when we were younger. And so we turn to Daniel, chapter 2.

Daniel 2:1-49

Our Father, we thank You for this word and now we ask that You would instruct us from it. We marvel at Your power and Your wisdom displayed in this gripping story. But it's more than a story, O God, it is the truth. Its events are recorded for us under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and it's not simply meant to thrill us, or to inform us of the past, but to instruct us in Christian living. So give us grace to

hear its messages for we ask this prayer in Jesus' name, Amen.

There are many striking aspects about the passage that is before us tonight. Let me share with you a few of them before we look at it in outline. You will notice in verse 4 of Daniel, chapter 2, the statement the Chaldeans spoke to the king in Aramaic. In the original, the first chapter and first four verses of chapter two are written in Hebrew. At verse 4 of chapter 2, and running all the way to chapter 7, verse 28 the language changes to Aramaic that was an international language in the day of Daniel. This has caused commentators much consternation and speculation as to why the book would start out in Hebrew, switch to Aramaic and then in the final four chapters 8 to 12 switch back to Hebrew again. But interestingly the section of the book that is written in Aramaic deals with the purposes of God in history with regard to the rise and decline of empires. And so it would have strictly involved interesting matters for more than simply the children of Israel in Babylon and it may well be that these chapters are intended to be shared with those who are outside of the people of God in Daniel's day. At any rate, chapters 1 and chapters 8 through 12 focus on the meaning of those events recorded in chapters 2 through 7, the events for the people of God.

This passage begins in a strange way. It begins with a dream. The dream of a pagan ruler. God is sovereign and He reveals Himself in whatever way He so desires to reveal Himself. And so this passage begins with a half-remembered and consternating dream of a pagan ruler. God's sovereignty is thus displayed in that He reveals His plan for the future through a dream to, of all people, Nebuchadnezzar. He establishes His purposes by whatever means He pleases.

Now whatever the details of Daniel, chapter 2 mean, the great message is clear. That even in the midst of the rise and the fall of world empires and the reigns of good and bad rulers and in good times and bad times, the kingdom of God will be established. It will grow, it will ultimately triumph throughout the whole earth in the lives of ordinary men and women. And so I'd like to turn your attention to three particular sections of this passage before us tonight.

I. The restlessness of heart that knows no peace with God

The first one you will see in verses 1 through 13. There we see the crisis in the court. Nebuchadnezzar can't get an answer. So he's decided to just kill all the wise men. It's a solution, I guess. You can't get an answer from them, just kill them all. I don't know whether he planned to start over again but in that passage where we see Nebuchadnezzar displayed, we see the restlessness of a heart that knows no peace with God. Nebuchadnezzar, though the most powerful king on earth, though he may have been a king among kings, in his heart he was nothing but a lost child in the darkness. And his actions show it. Nebuchadnezzar either can't remember the dream or he can't remember it clearly or he can't trust his own advisors not to hoodwink him in the interpretation. Now whichever the

answer is, it's a pretty pitiful condition for the man who was the most powerful monarch on earth at his time. And so befuddled, he calls for his wise men and he asks them not just to tell him the interpretation, but first to tell him the dream and all its details and then tell him the interpretation. This is how he seems to want to safeguard being duped by those who are his own counselors and wise men.

The wise men, of course, are petrified at this prospect. Nobody calls in the wise men and asks them for the dream *and* the interpretation. They are just supposed to be able to give the interpretation. And they even urge the impossibility of the task that makes Nebuchadnezzar even angrier. And so he orders for all of them to be slaughtered. That's where Daniel and his friends come in. The message comes to Daniel and Daniel goes into action. But even in that short picture, the picture that opens the passage up, there are many practical lessons in it for us.

First of all, we see the restlessness of the heart of a worldling. Nebuchadnezzar may have been the most powerful man on earth at his own time, but he's absolutely out of his depth with a little dream. Two years or so into his reign and he's already being troubled by nightmares. He has everything that a worldling could dream of; he has fame, he has power, he has wealth, he has influence, and yet he has no peace because his heart is set on the world. He is a fundamentally insecure man. You see, God has made us for Himself, and our hearts are restless until we find our rest in Him. And though Nebuchadnezzar has everything that the world can offer, because he has set his heart on the world in order to find his peace, he has not found it. He is not only an insecure man, he is a hostile man. He's angry, he's frustrated, he's frustrated at his own lack of inner peace and contentment and he's also frustrated by a lack of ability to control his own destiny. And this is why you see this lashing out at his wise men.

You see, we find peace in this life only in the righteousness of Christ that brings us fellowship with God. And Nebuchadnezzar does not know that kind of peace. In fact, it was Luther who reminded us that it is due to the perversity of men that they seek peace first, and only then righteousness. Consequently, they find no peace. Nebuchadnezzar did not know the peace that comes from righteousness and so he was a man who was fundamentally insecure and fundamentally hostile.

But let me say, you don't have to be the pagan ruler of the most powerful nation on earth to have Nebuchadnezzar's problem. You can be a minister and be a worldling. Your heart can basically be set and circumscribed by the things of this life. You can be a student in college or in seminary and be a worldling. You can be a mother, you can be a church member, and you can be a church officer. You can be in any role in life and still be taken captive by this insidious problem of worldliness. And so God reminds us in this very passage of the danger of a restless heart not at peace with God.

We also notice in this passage that God uses Nebuchadnezzar's wrath against

his own wise men to bring about a circumstance in which Daniel will be promoted in the court. God uses Nebuchadnezzar's own anger against his own men in order to bring about greater influence for God's man, Daniel, in the court of Babylon. And so we see in verses 1 through 13 crisis in the court.

II. The confidence of a heart that knows the peace of God

In verses 14 through 30, the center of the passage, we see a stark contrast. If Nebuchadnezzar is a man who is restless and has no peace, Daniel is a man who is confident because he has found peace. Daniel is not self-confident. Daniel is confident in God. For in verses 14 through 30, we see the example of a grace-transformed life in the person of Daniel. Daniel's character makes you want to cheer in this story. It is amazing the calm with which he receives the news of his death sentence. The king has ordered that all the wise men be killed. What is the urgency with this command? Daniel seems in complete control throughout and he manifests the confidence of a heart that knows the peace of God. There are three things in particular Daniel shows in this passage.

First of all, Daniel shows wisdom. In verses 14 through 16 Daniel acts with wisdom in his response to the king's decree. Notice how he is. He is confident, he's composed, he thinks out a plan, a strategy, a mode of operation. He shows great dignity and decorum as he talks both with the captain of the king's secret police and also with the king himself. Daniel shows wisdom. Wisdom is, of course, the fruit of knowing the word of God and living the word out in our lives. Wisdom as such does not necessarily come with age, though it ought to. And in Daniel's case, wisdom has come with a man who is very young and yet he knows God's word and he has lived it out and so he acts with wisdom.

Secondly, in verses 17 through 19, you see that Daniel is a man of prayer. He's not only a man of wisdom, but also a man of prayer. Daniel, after approaching the king asking for time, making a promise of being able to bring an interpretation, immediately goes back to Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah and he says, let's have a prayer meeting. Let's pray that God would reveal Himself in His compassion and mercy; let's pray that God would reveal Himself to us. And so Daniel, not out of self-interest, but in an opportunity to glorify God, instigates a prayer meeting among his friends.

And then in verse 19 when he gets the answer, he immediately follows it up in the verses following from 19 to 23, with praise and with worship. Daniel, in response to God's answer, lifts up words of thanksgiving and praise. Now you might say, "But Daniel got the answer that he wanted. Of course he gave thanksgiving." Did you read the answer that Daniel got? That's the answer that he's going to give the king. Would you like to volunteer to go before Nebuchadnezzar to take that answer? But Daniel thanked God for it. He got the answer. It's a message that Nebuchadnezzar is not going to want to hear. It may

not be quite as blunt as the message that Nebuchadnezzar is going to hear in Daniel chapter 4, but it's blunt enough: "Your kingdom's not going to last, Nebuchadnezzar. A little stone, uncut by human hands, is going to bring it crashing to the ground. And though it is a reign of gold, it will not be the permanent reign of the kingdom of God." You want to take that message to Nebuchadnezzar? Daniel thanks God for that message.

And in particular, in his worship of God, look at verses 20 and 21 and 23 and see that he worships and he praises God for God's eternal wisdom and power. He praises God that God is in control of history in verse 21. And as he uses that phrase, "God of my fathers," he reminds us of God's nearness to His people. In this passage, Daniel shows himself to be a man of wisdom and of prayer and of praise. And there are many points of application that we can learn from this passage.

First of all, Daniel shows confidence in God's sovereignty, even in the midst of this crisis. He is prayerful, he is full of thanksgiving in a time of crisis and that prompts the question. Are we in the times of crisis, do we respond with wisdom and prayer and thanksgiving in times of crisis? Surely He has provided us a model for our own tribulations.

Notice also the contrast between Daniel and the wise men. Daniel has a place to go for his answers. The wise men, the magicians, the diviners, the Chaldeans, the conjurers, they had no place to go for their answer. They could not find their answer within. But Daniel has the Lord God of heaven and earth to look through.

Notice also that Daniel, the king instinctively senses this later on, Daniel is a man who can be trusted. The king can't trust his own counselors. Why? Because the king knows that his counselors care more about what he thinks of them than they do telling the truth. It will be very apparent from the king, from the moment that Daniel begins to speak, that he does not care what the king thinks about his message, because Daniel is invested in heaven. Daniel could care less what the greatest king on earth thinks because his investment is in God alone. That, I suspect, that characteristic or quality may be the most crying need amongst the young Christians of today as we face the world. To just not care what the world thinks and to care more about what God thinks because our investments are there.

There was a New England Puritan minister named Thomas Hooker who was known for being very plain spoken, even with famous personages in his presence when he preached. And it was said by one of his contemporaries that "Hooker, when he preaches seems to grow in size until you would have thought he could have picked up a king and put him in his pocket." It's just like Daniel. Daniel, when he speaks, seems to grow in size until when he's finished you would think that he could pick up a king and put him in his pocket, because Daniel is a servant of the King of Kings and he doesn't care what any earthly king thinks.

Notice also in this passage how, in one event, God prepares Daniel and his friends for further faithfulness in the time of the fiery furnace, and at the same time humbles Nebuchadnezzar. Isn't God amazing? His sovereignty is shown in that in the same event, this mysterious dream, He can humble Nebuchadnezzar and simultaneously prepare His servants to be faithful in the future. Here in this passage we see the confidence of a heart that knows the peace of God. Do you have that kind of confidence? Do you have that kind of peace with God?

III. God's kingdom will prevail over all.

And then in verses 31 through 49, we see Daniel's word of proclamation. His revelation of God's sovereignty in history, both the present and the future. Here in this passage the message that Daniel gives in his telling of Nebuchadnezzar the dream and his interpretation of that dream, his message is that God's kingdom will prevail over all. Daniel reveals the meaning of the dream. He reveals the dream itself to Nebuchadnezzar, but he never takes credit: 'Nebuchadnezzar, I didn't know this because I have more wisdom than other men, I know it because God revealed it to me.'

Notice also in verse 31 that Nebuchadnezzar is put in his place by Daniel in the very first verse of the Revelation. "You, O king, were looking." That phrase is a humbling phrase. Nebuchadnezzar is the greatest power on earth, but in this dream all he is is a spectator. God is the one who is controlling history. All Nebuchadnezzar can do is look on because he doesn't call the shots, God does.

Notice also that Daniel describes four empires. First, the great empire of Nebuchadnezzar and Babylon. Then the Median-Persian empire. Then the empire of Alexander the Great in Greece, and finally the empire of Rome. But it is the kingdom of God in the form of the uncut rock, the rock that was not made by human hands that will rule over them all. In other words, in contrast to the worldly empires of Daniel's day and after, this empire is not made by the hands of man. Just like the steps of the altar of God, it is of uncut stone and so God's kingdom rules over all the kingdoms of this world.

One of the points of this message is that the key to understanding God's designs in history is not to be found in political and military aspects, but rather in the moral and spiritual qualities of a nation. In response to this interpretation of the dream, Nebuchadnezzar falls on his face. He's awed. He exalts Daniel. He gives him influence but he doesn't convert. Just like the people we read about this week in Matthew, chapter 9, he's amazed; amazed at what God says, but he's not changed in his heart. He's still hardened and he doesn't follow after the one true God.

There are two words of comfort that we can learn from this vision that is put

before us tonight. The first word is this. We already belong to this kingdom. We're already part of this kingdom and that means that our allegiance must be to this kingdom. For those of us who live in a country where we are not openly persecuted, rather enticed by the value system and the world view of the culture, we must be ready to stand firm and show our allegiance to God's kingdom, for that kingdom will prevail.

Secondly, we learn that the people of God have the assurance of God's own word that His kingdom will ultimately triumph. Think of the encouragement of Daniel's friends hearing the interpretation of a message originally given by God to Nebuchadnezzar. The interpretation being that God's kingdom, though Israel is in captivity, though no nation of Israel exists, yet God's kingdom will destroy the kingdoms of the world and will ultimately prevail.

As we close, I would like you to look very briefly at verse 35 of Daniel, chapter 2: "Then the iron, and the clay and the bronze and the silver and the gold were crushed all at the same time and became like chaff from the summer threshing floors; and the wind carried them away so that not a trace of them was found. But the stone that struck the statue became a great mountain and filled the whole earth." There in that passage, if keep your finger in Daniel 2, and turn back with me and, turn back with me to Psalm 1. In Psalm 1 we see the words that are being deliberately echoed here in Daniel 2, verse 35. Psalm 1, verse 4: "The wicked are not so, But they are like chaff which the wind drives away. Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous." Daniel is reminding us there that God will judge and His kingdom will prevail.

And then if you'll look at Daniel 2, verses 44 and 45: "And in the days of those kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom which will never be destroyed and that kingdom will not be left for another people. It will crush and put an end to all the kingdoms and it will itself endure forever."

And then if you'll turn back to Psalm 2, and there in Psalm 2, verses 8 and 9 the Lord speaks to the Messiah: "Ask of Me, and I will surely give the nations as Thy inheritance, and the very ends of the earth as Thy possession. Thou shalt break them with a rod of iron, Thou shalt shatter them like earthenware." Daniel 2 reminds us of the fulfillment of the Lord's promise to the Messiah in Psalm 2. Praise God. He is sovereign in history and all of those whose confidence is in Him may have hearts of confidence in the time of crisis. Let's look to Him in prayer.

Our Father, we thank You for Your sovereignty and we thank You for the message of Daniel. We thank You for his courage and we thank You, O God, for Christ the one who is the Messiah who is the King of Kings and who is the Lord of Lords and who reigns over an empire which will never cease, of which we are a part by grace. Help us, O Lord, to stand firm and to be of good courage in this

world. We ask it in Jesus' name, Amen.

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