

# “Whose Dwelling Is Not with Flesh”

## The Fourth in a Series of Sermons on the Book of Daniel

*Texts: Daniel 2:1-24; Colossians 1:15-23*

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The mood in the Babylonian court has completely changed between the time Nebuchadnezzar claimed the throne in 605 BC, and the scene which unfolds in Daniel chapter 2. In the opening chapter of his prophecy, Daniel describes Nebuchadnezzar as an all-powerful king, bestowing favors on those servants who have successfully completed their transformation from captured youths into humble and efficient servants in the Babylonian court, young men who come from the various peoples defeated by the Babylonians, now dedicated to serve the king and worship his Babylonian “gods.” But in chapter 2 (which takes place two years later in 603 BC), the king is troubled and frightened because he has had a dream—the meaning of which escapes him. The royal court which seemed so dominant over its humiliated subjects is now depicted as a place of fear, helplessness, and brutality.<sup>1</sup> Whatever it was that the king had dreamed, coupled with the failure of Nebuchadnezzar’s magicians and astrologers to interpret the dream for him for him, at first leads to great peril for Daniel and his friends, but then becomes an opportunity for Daniel to ascend in rank and importance in the court. This is because YHWH is Daniel’s shield and defender, and the source of both Nebuchadnezzaer’s dream and Daniel’s interpretation.

We resume our series on the Book of Daniel, and we now take up Daniel’s second chapter. Chapter 2 contains a 49 verse story dominated by Nebuchadnezzar’s dream of a bizarre statue composed of four different metals (which represent four different earthly kingdoms), which is then destroyed by a giant rock (which represents an eternal kingdom established by the God of Heaven). The revelation given by the Lord to Daniel regarding the meaning of the king’s dream tempts us to focus entirely upon the sequence of future events revealed, for as we will see, the dream contains a remarkably accurate prediction of the rise of future empires and events. Yet, we must not overlook the big picture purpose of the story of the king’s dream and Daniel’s interpretation of that dream. Although the details of the vision which follows are interesting and important because the dream predicts the histories of the great world empires, this is not as important to Daniel’s message as the fact that only YHWH knows the future, because he is the author of the future. It is YHWH’s kingdom, not any of the four which Nebuchadnezzar sees in his dream, which triumphs over all other kingdoms of the world in the end.<sup>2</sup>

For the next several weeks we must deal with the tyranny of time. The account in Daniel 2 of Nebuchadnezzar’s dream and Daniel’s interpretation of it, is a single unit which is best covered in one sitting. But this requires far more time than the half-hour or so we can spend on Sunday sermons. So rather than skimming through the entire chapter and then just hitting the highlights (there are too many and the dream is too important for that), we will break the chapter in four parts and spend several Sundays going through the various parts. The first part is the king’s dream and his challenge to his court magicians to recall and explain it to him (vv. 1-13). The second part is God’s revelation of the dream to

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<sup>1</sup> Ralph Dale Davis, The Message of Daniel: His Kingdom Cannot Fail, The Bible Speaks Today, ed., J. A. Motyer (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2013), 39.

<sup>2</sup> Longman, Daniel, 73.

Daniel (vv. 14-23). We will cover both of these sections this time. The third part of the chapter is Daniel's God-given explanation of the dream to the king (vv. 24-45), and then finally, we have the king's very favorable response after Daniel interprets the dream for Nebuchadnezzar (vv. 46-49).

The interpretive key to understanding whole of the chapter correctly (the big picture) is found neither in the dream, nor in the interpretation of the dream. Rather, the key is found in Daniel's prayer to YHWH as recounted in verses 20-23. In this prayer, as we will see, the two themes surface which we have identified earlier as running throughout the entirety of Daniel's prophecy: First, God's absolute sovereignty over all of human history, including YHWH's rule over the great empires depicted by the statue in the dream, and then, second, God's fatherly care of Daniel and his friends evident when YHWH protects Daniel and his three friends from the king's wrath, by enabling Daniel to do what the Babylonian court experts cannot do, recount and then interpret the king's dream.<sup>3</sup> As a result (vv. 46-49), Daniel is made a ruler in the province of Babylon, as well as chief prefect over the king's wise men (counselors). Daniel also secures posts for Shadrach (Hananiah) Meshach (Mishael) and Abednego (Azariah).

We have in this chapter then, what amounts to a "court tale of conquest." At first glance, the rivals are Daniel and the king's advisors, but the real contest is between YHWH and the king's idols<sup>4</sup>—just as it had been in Egypt in the contest between Moses and Pharaoh's magicians. Of course, when the contest is over, it is clear to all—believer and unbeliever alike—that the Babylonian "gods" are no match for YHWH. Daniel is the wisest of the so-called "wise men," because YHWH has given him the wisdom and ability to interpret the king's dream, while protecting Daniel and his friends.

As we turn then to our text, the first 24 verses of Daniel 2, the first thing we notice is the specific time established by Daniel, "*in the second year of the reign of Nebuchadnezzar*" which would be the spring of 603 BC. We also learn that something was deeply troubling the king. "*Nebuchadnezzar had dreams; his spirit was troubled, and his sleep left him.*" We do not know what caused the king's troubles—whether he had too many goat meat Shish Kebabs or too much caffeine late at night—but his sleep was interrupted and after falling back asleep he dreamt (the time when dreams are the most vivid). Before the invention of artificial lighting it was very common for people to go to bed just after dark—then awaken for a time around midnight—and then go back to sleep until first light. This is likely what happened to Nebuchadnezzar. He slept, was awakened, and then upon returning to sleep had his dream.<sup>5</sup> The king was deeply troubled by its content—which involves a great metal statute with clay feet being crushed by a rock made without human hands.

The king seeks relief from those in the royal court whom the king consulted in such matters. "*Then the king commanded that the magicians, the enchanters, the sorcerers, and the Chaldeans be summoned to tell the king his dreams. So they came in and stood before the king.*" The list given us by Daniel is important—magicians, enchanters, and sorcerers—men who claim to see the future, talk to the dead, or interpret strange phenomena (storms, earthquakes, droughts, etc.). These men (known as "Chaldeans" as a group) were practitioners of the occult (the demonic). Such men were common in the courts of the ancient world and understand such dreams to have regular patterns which could be discerned so as to

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<sup>3</sup> Steinmann, Daniel, 109-110.

<sup>4</sup> Longman, Daniel, 74.

<sup>5</sup> Steinmann, Daniel, 114.

“interpret” such dreams correctly. There are even ancient manuals from Babylon (“dream books”) explaining how to do this. But this was such a complicated a “science” that it took much time and study to master these manuals and be admitted to the royal court.<sup>6</sup> The folly of this will be exposed by the young man Daniel, the prophet of YHWH.

With the “Chaldeans” now standing before the distraught and troubled king, we read in verse 3, “*and the king said to them, ‘I had a dream, and my spirit is troubled to know the dream.’*” Either the king cannot recall the details of the dream—which is not uncommon—or else (and this is much more likely) the king recalls much of the dream but does not reveal the details so as to test whether or not his “court magicians” are actually interpreting his dream, or are merely offering flattering words meant to gain his favor and not provoke his anger. Nebuchadnezzar was no slouch. He is asking for much more than an interpretation of the dream. He is asking for a recounting of the specifics of what he dreamt, as well as an interpretation. He will put his court magicians to the test. He will not like the outcome.

An important bit of irony appears in verse 4. “*Then the Chaldeans said to the king in Aramaic, ‘O king, live forever! Tell your servants the dream, and we will show the interpretation.’*” The text switches from Hebrew to Aramaic until the end of chapter 7. The irony is that the king’s subjects begin with the common address offered by servants to someone of Nebuchadnezzar’s great prestige and power. This is a prayer to the “gods” (Bel or Marduk) offered on behalf of the king, who was often associated with the “gods” as though he were one of them. The irony in this is that Nebuchadnezzar is but a mere mortal, whose dream will reveal that his reign and kingdom will come and go. The king will not live forever despite the invocation of pagan “gods.” Some have wondered whether or not this a bit of satire on Daniel’s part, pointing out the fate of Nebuchadnezzar and the futile efforts of his court magicians to bring about eternal life through the prayer they offer.<sup>7</sup> But Daniel will go on to recall and interpret the dream, only to tell the king about an eternal king and a kingdom which will not end, but endure forever (cf. v. 44). The New Testament will identify this kingdom for us (Revelation 11:15)—“*The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever.*”

Likely able to recall the essence of the dream if not all of its details, the king demands that his “spiritual advisors” tell him both the details of the dream and its interpretation. “*The king answered and said to the Chaldeans, ‘The word from me is firm: if you do not make known to me the dream and its interpretation, you shall be torn limb from limb, and your houses shall be laid in ruins. But if you show the dream and its interpretation, you shall receive from me gifts and rewards and great honor. Therefore show me the dream and its interpretation.’*” Serving in the court of someone like Nebuchadnezzar is like being chained to a lion—its fine while the lion is well fed, in a good mood, and worried about other lions. But should the lion get hungry . . . Nebuchadnezzar’s dream is much too important to let the “Chaldeans” get away with mere formalities. If they do not recount both the dream and give an interpretation, they will suffer a most horrible fate—torn limb from limb with their houses (i.e., their families) destroyed. Should they be able to tell the king what he dreamt and what it meant, they will be greatly rewarded.

From the opening chapter, we have been led to expect such behavior from a king devoted to the absolute destruction of his enemies by kidnaping young Hebrew royals and nobles. He is also the same king who gouged out the eyes of his enemies—as Nebuchadnezzar will do to the king of Judah when he sacks

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<sup>6</sup> Baldwin, Daniel, 97.

<sup>7</sup> Steinmann, Daniel, 115-117; Davis, The Message of Daniel 39.

Jerusalem 587 BC. As recounted in 2 Kings 25:6-7, *“Then they captured the king [Zedekiah] and brought him up to the king of Babylon at Riblah, and they passed sentence on him. They slaughtered the sons of Zedekiah before his eyes, and put out the eyes of Zedekiah and bound him in chains and took him to Babylon.”* Nebuchadnezzar remains a cruel tyrant—nineteen years after taking the throne when he destroyed Jerusalem, the temple, and then blinded the defeated king of Judah. We know from ancient sources that being torn apart by animals after being drawn and quartered was a common punishment, and that the destruction of one’s home and the killing of any family was often meted out upon anyone who offended or disrespected the king. Brutal stuff.

According to verse 7, the “Chaldeans” do not know what to do. *“They answered a second time and said, ‘Let the king tell his servants the dream, and we will show its interpretation.’”* They cannot give the king what he wants. Nebuchadnezzar—who demands an interpretation to the dream which has greatly troubled him—now suspects his advisors are stalling because they do not know what the king has dreamed, and are therefore unable to consult their “dream books” for an interpretation. If they stall long enough, they hope, Nebuchadnezzar will forget all about his dream, and eventually find other things to worry about. The very fact that Nebuchadnezzar does not immediately make good on his threat indicates us how badly he wants resolution to that which is troubling him so much—the meaning of this dream!

In verses 8-9, *“the king answered and said, ‘I know with certainty that you are trying to gain time, because you see that the word from me is firm—if you do not make the dream known to me, there is but one sentence for you. You have agreed to speak lying and corrupt words before me till the times change. Therefore tell me the dream, and I shall know that you can show me its interpretation.’”* If Nebuchadnezzar can recall this much about the dream, this implies he wants to make sure that both the dream—and more importantly, its interpretation—are recounted. This matter is not as simple as someone having a weird dream after going back to sleep. In fact, as the story unfolds, we will see, it is YHWH who has given Nebuchadnezzar this dream (which is why he is so troubled), and it is YHWH who reveals both the details and the interpretation to Daniel. This is why the Chaldeans have no hope of recounting the details of the dream to the king—it was given by divine revelation and they are pagans with no access to such truth. A late night goat-meat Shish Kebab dream they can handle. But not this.

The Chaldeans are forced to respond a third time—this time, no doubt, terrified that they are about to be torn apart and their families killed. As we learn in verses 10-11, *“the Chaldeans answered the king and said, ‘There is not a man on earth who can meet the king’s demand, for no great and powerful king has asked such a thing of any magician or enchanter or Chaldean. The thing that the king asks is difficult, and no one can show it to the king except the gods, whose dwelling is not with flesh.’”* The only answer left to them is to tell the king that his demand is too great—in effect blaming him. There is no one alive who could tell of the king’s dream, much less interpret it. We can only but wonder if this answer was a ruse on the part of the Chaldeans, hoping that the king might get frustrated and divulge details of the dream giving them at something to work with.

In this, we see the huge gulf between Daniel’s understanding of YHWH (the true and living God) and that of the pagan conception of the “gods.” The “gods” of the Babylonians do not dwell with humans—and indeed cannot. They are not personal (but mere powers or forces) and so cannot reveal personal information to anyone. The only thing the Chaldeans can do was read the “signs” which the “gods” supposedly reveal in nature. Ezekiel describes this procedure for us (21:21). *“For the king of Babylon stands at the parting of the way, at the head of the two ways, to use divination. He shakes the arrows; he consults the teraphim [household ‘gods’ and idols]; he looks at the liver.”* The “gods” of the Babylonians are lifeless, mute, powerless. The divinization of the Chaldeans amounted to reading animal

entrails and interpreting flights of birds, events in the sky (meteors, etc.) or psychological events, like premonitions, etc. In this, we see the complete and total futility of paganism and the occult.

Daniel reveals in what follows that the God whom he serves is the true and living God, and who, according to passages such as Exodus 29:45-46; 40:35; 2 Sam. 15:25; 1 Chronicles 23:25, dwells in the midst of his people, first in the tabernacle and then in the temple.<sup>8</sup> He is the God who gave Nebuchadnezzar his troubling dream, and he is the God who will give Daniel both the contents of the dream and the proper interpretation. YHWH reveals himself as the living God who crushes all the kingdoms of this world. He is the Triune God who took to himself a true human nature, became incarnate, and walked among us—as we read in the Prologue of John’s gospel (vv. 1-14), and as we read in our New Testament lesson (Colossians 1:15-23). Daniel serves this true and living God, the God who can and does speak, and who can and does dwell in the midst of his people—a concept foreign to pagans.

The king has had enough stalling and equivocating on the part of the Chaldeans. He is now in a full rage, his temper and fear getting the better of him. We read in verses 12-13, *“because of this the king was angry and very furious, and commanded that all the wise men of Babylon be destroyed. So the decree went out, and the wise men were about to be killed; and they sought Daniel and his companions, to kill them.”* No one in the king’s court will escape his wrath. Not the Chaldeans, not any of the court advisors and counselors, none of the so called “wise men” (in other words, his entire cabinet, i.e., all the officials at court). Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah were also among this group. Panic must have spread throughout the court. Thankfully, it would take some time to summon the guards and the executioners to carry out the king’s sentence. Daniel takes quick action.

We read in verses 14-16, *“then Daniel replied with prudence and discretion to Arioch, the captain of the king’s guard, who had gone out to kill the wise men of Babylon.”* Upon learning the news that the king was in a rage and had ordered the death of all the palace servants and counselors, and demonstrating the wisdom YHWH has bestowed upon him, Daniel sought out the captain of the guard before he could carry out his orders. *“He declared to Arioch, the king’s captain, ‘Why is the decree of the king so urgent?’”* Daniel does not challenge the king’s authority or his judgment as the Chaldeans had foolishly done. Daniel asks a direct question and actually gets an answer. *“Then Arioch made the matter known to Daniel.”* With a calmness well beyond his years, *“Daniel went in and requested the king to appoint him a time, that he might show the interpretation to the king.”* How Daniel was able to gain an audience with the king, we are not told. But Daniel claims he can do what the Chaldeans cannot. He can both recall and interpret the dream. Nothing is said about the details of the conversation between the king and Daniel, but it is obvious from what follows that Nebuchadnezzar granted Daniel’s request. Daniel’s prudence and discretion—given him by YHWH—have served him well.

In the face of such great danger and uncertainty, Daniel’s hope is in YHWH, the true and living God. He and his three friends are facing a real and present danger from the king’s threat. In verses 17-18, we learn, *“then Daniel went to his house and made the matter known to Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, his companions, and told them to seek mercy from the God of heaven concerning this mystery, so that Daniel and his companions might not be destroyed with the rest of the wise men of Babylon.”* It is probably not an accident that Daniel here speaks of his friends by their Hebrew names, not the Babylonian names given them by their captors. The only hope for their survival is that YHWH intervene and grant Daniel the knowledge of that which Nebuchadnezzar had dreamt. They will seek YHWH’s mercy through

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<sup>8</sup> Steinmann, Daniel, 119-120.

prayer. The application here is obvious—we must always flee to the Lord in times of peril.

YHWH has given Nebuchadnezzar a dream at night. This dream troubles him greatly. He now gives a dream to Daniel at night, revealing to him the contents of Nebuchadnezzar's dream. But this dream reassures Daniel of YHWH's favor toward him and his three friends. Daniel grows confident, while the king is increasingly distressed. The divine revelation described in verse 19 not only saves the lives of Daniel, his three friends, as well as the entire palace staff, but will become the means by which YHWH elevates Daniel to a place of great authority with the kingdom. We are simply told, "*then the mystery was revealed to Daniel in a vision of the night.*" Daniel's response to the revelation of mystery which will save him and his friends is equally simple. "*Then Daniel blessed the God of heaven.*" YHWH is the personal God, who speaks, who acts, and who is not a mere force, or but a part of the natural order (like the sun, moon, stars). Having made all things the Babylonians worship, YHWH alone is the God who dwells in heaven.

The content of Daniel's blessing of YHWH is revealed in verses 20-23. "*Daniel answered and said: 'Blessed be the name of God forever and ever, to whom belong wisdom and might. He changes times and seasons; he removes kings and sets up kings; he gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to those who have understanding; he reveals deep and hidden things; he knows what is in the darkness, and the light dwells with him. To you, O God of my fathers, I give thanks and praise, for you have given me wisdom and might, and have now made known to me what we asked of you, for you have made known to us the king's matter.'*" There are three theological themes in Daniel's prayer which underlie and explain all that follows.<sup>9</sup>

First, YHWH is worthy of praise and worship because he is the eternal God who gives wisdom, and knowledge to those with understanding (faith). The wisdom which enables Daniel to excel throughout what follows was given him by YHWH. Daniel survives the king's rage even and thrives after interpreting the king's dream, only because of God's gifts to him. Second, it is YHWH who controls the times and seasons, who raises up kings and then removes them. It is YHWH who gave Johaikim over to Nebuchadnezzar. It is YHWH who gave Judah into Nebuchadnezzar's hands. It is YHWH who "gave" wisdom to Daniel. And it is YHWH who will crush Babylon and its kings for oppressing the people of God. Even though Nebuchadnezzar rules because God has raised him up to accomplish YHWH's sovereign purpose, Nebuchadnezzar's rule will end just as soon as God wills it. This was revealed to Daniel in the dream. Third, YHWH alone is to be praised because he answers hears the prayers of his people, especially in the midst of their trials and crises. He alone is the true, eternal and living God.

All three of the points become clear to those whom YHWH grants wisdom. In his prayer Daniel frames all that follows in the balance of his prophecy. The "Chaldeans" are useless to Nebuchadnezzar since YHWH has given him this dream. The "gods" of Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians have no power except that given them by those who worship them. They are lifeless and mute figures of the human imagination. It is YHWH alone who is the true and living God and who reveals his will to Nebuchadnezzar. This fact establishes everything which follows, not only in this chapter, but all the rest of the Book of Daniel. As a result, we read in verse 24, "*therefore Daniel went in to Arioch, whom the king had appointed to destroy the wise men of Babylon. He went and said thus to him: 'Do not destroy the wise men of Babylon; bring me in before the king, and I will show the king the interpretation.'*" The stage is set for Daniel to recount the king's dream and then interpret it, as we will see next time.

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<sup>9</sup> Steinmann, Daniel, 124-125.

What then, do we take with us by way of application? First, we see why all human fascination with and attraction to the occult is both foolish and dangerous—because there is no reality in any of this, yet those who think these things are real are ironically enslaved to that which has no reality. Lest we forget, YHWH condemns all occult practices and warns of judgment upon every professing Christian who trivializes and experiments with the occult—it is a supreme offence to God and is identified as a great sin.

Second, there is no doubt who will win the conflict between Daniel and the court magicians—YHWH. He gives Daniel the wisdom to save himself and the entire Babylonian court, so that he can reveal the future course of history—all of this mind you, occurs sixteen years before Nebuchadnezzar destroys Jerusalem and the temple in 587, and takes the bulk of Israelites into exile. The Babylonian “gods” are the mere figment of human imagination and superstition, “*whose dwelling is not with flesh.*” YHWH, on the other hand, is the true living God who becomes incarnate in the person of Jesus, who dwells among his people, having died for their sins and being raised for their justification. We conclude then, with the words of Revelation 21:1-5,

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.”

This is the Triune God we worship, incarnate in Jesus Christ, whose dwelling is with flesh!