

“A God in Heaven Who Reveals Mysteries”

The Fifth in a Series of Sermons on the Book of Daniel

Texts: Daniel 2:24-45: 1 Corinthians 2:6-16

King Nebuchadnezzar is in a rage and is threatening to execute his entire palace staff. He had been awakened by a troubling dream which both confused and frightened him. He then summoned his court magicians and wise men (“the Chaldeans”) to explain the meaning of what he had just dreamt. But his Chaldeans cannot recount the details of his dream much less offer an interpretation. No help in relieving the king’s anxiety, and upon seeing the king’s anger at them, the Chaldeans seek to stall Nebuchadnezzar, hoping he will forget about the dream and move on to other things. Meanwhile, the young Hebrew servant Daniel, who has impressed the king from the moment he first appeared before the king in the royal court, offers the very thing the king’s magicians, sorcerers, and wise men cannot. Daniel will recount the details of the king’s dream, and then give him an interpretation. In the scene which plays out in chapter 2 of Daniel’s prophecy, we learn that YHWH has given his young servant Daniel the gift of wisdom, and also revealed to the prophet both the content and the meaning of the king’s dream. In the contest between Daniel and the court magicians which follows, Daniel will easily win because the Babylonian “gods” are nothing but the figment of human imagination and superstition, while YHWH is the true and living God, who directs the course of history, who grants wisdom, who speaks, and who answers prayer.

We continue our series on the Book of Daniel and we are working our way through the 49 verses of chapter 2. Last time, we covered the first two parts of this chapter. In first part (vv. 1-13), we considered the king’s dream and his challenge to his court magicians to recall and explain meaning of it to him. The second part of the chapter (vv. 14-23), describes God’s revelation of the dream to Daniel—the very thing which Nebuchadnezzar demands from his court magicians. The third part of the chapter, which we will take up, includes Daniel’s God-given recounting and explanation of the dream to the king (vv. 24-45). Then finally, we have the king’s very favorable response after Daniel interprets the dream for Nebuchadnezzar (vv. 46-49)—a matter to which we will return next time.

After the king blows the royal gasket, Daniel’s quick and decisive action saved the lives of the entire Babylonian royal court, all of whom are about to be killed because of Nebuchadnezzar’s outrage stemming from the fact that his Chaldeans can neither recount his dream nor interpret it. Under threat of imminent execution, Daniel spoke directly to the captain of palace guard, the man assigned to put to death the “Chaldeans,” and all the court servants (including Daniel and his three friends). As 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. He declared to Arioch, the king’s captain, “Why is the decree of the king so urgent?” Then Arioch made the matter known to Daniel. And Daniel went in and requested the king to appoint him a time, that he might show the interpretation to the king.*” The king wants an interpretation to his dream, and if his court magicians cannot do so, then the king will see to it that the entire palace staff is executed.

Although we are not given any specific details, remarkably, the young Hebrew servant Daniel gained an audience with the king himself, who granted Daniel’s request and appointed a time when Daniel would return and recount the details and then give the king the proper interpretation of his dream. We already know from verses 20-23, that in yet another dream God revealed to Daniel the contents of the king’s

dream (since it was YHWH who gave the king the dream in the first place) as well as the proper interpretation. Throughout what follows, Daniel is not being brash, but knowing in advance what the king has dreamed, Daniel is confident that YHWH will continue to be with him and protect him (and his friends) from the king's wrath. According to 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.'*"

Careful to follow proper protocol, Daniel appeals to Arioch, who, in turn, brings Daniel before the king (v. 25). "*Then Arioch brought in Daniel before the king in haste and said thus to him: 'I have found among the exiles from Judah a man who will make known to the king the interpretation.'*" It is worth pointing out that Arioch is not above taking credit for finding someone who can interpret the king's dream and assuage his wrath. Arioch may take the credit, but this effort to impress the king can also backfire. If Daniel fails to do as he claims, Arioch will be forced to put the king's entire staff to death, and likely face execution himself for having failed to deliver what the king demands.¹

The king must be a bit incredulous that this young Hebrew servant boldly claims to do the very thing the king's expert court magicians cannot—recall and interpret his dream. "*The king declared to Daniel, whose name was Belteshazzar, 'Are you able to make known to me the dream that I have seen and its interpretation?'*" The young servant's answer to the king's challenge in verses 27-28a, reflects the wisdom given him by YHWH. "*Daniel answered the king and said, 'No wise men, enchanters, magicians, or astrologers can show to the king the mystery that the king has asked, but there is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries, and he has made known to King Nebuchadnezzar what will be in the latter days.'*" The drama now playing out in the royal court is actually a contest between YHWH and the idols—YHWH wins by speaking mysteries while the Chaldeans fall silent, and by revealing to Nebuchadnezzar (through Daniel) that YHWH can and will crush all the kingdoms of this world.

It soon becomes clear that the king's trusted Chaldeans cannot relieve his distress and are obviously stalling for time. Yet here we have a young captive servant somehow gaining an audience with the king (this is only because YHWH brought this to pass), offering the king what no one else could. While the irony and drama of the story capture our attention, we must not miss the sub-text. As one wag puts it, "when tyrants suffer bad dreams, God is at work."² The Babylonian "gods"—whose supposed superiority Nebuchadnezzar has tried to force upon all those captives made to serve in his court, are now exposed for what they truly are—nothing but the figment of the sinful human imagination. When Nebuchadnezzar needs them most, his lifeless, silent gods cannot help him.

Daniel—who must have been given supernatural courage in addition to divine wisdom—dares to tell Nebuchadnezzar to his face that the king's "gods" are unable to give him what he needs. Mind you, throughout what follows, the young Daniel is telling his captor that the great Nebuchadnezzar is himself but a servant of YHWH, just as Daniel is the servant of the king. There is a true and living God who dwells in heaven and who can and does reveal mysteries—mysteries which the pagan sorcerers cannot possibly know, yet which foretell of the future course of history with such precision that down to this day, critical scholars reject an early date and Daniel's authorship of this book (along the Book of Daniel's 6th century BC Babylonian origins), because, as they contend, no one can possibly predict the

¹ Steinmann, Daniel, 132-133.

² Davis, The Message of Daniel 41.

future with this kind of accuracy. I hope the critical scholars do not miss the irony in taking their place alongside the Chaldeans in Nebuchadnezzar's court—those whose “gods” cannot reveal such things and who do not dwell in flesh. The bigger picture, as Daniel explains, is that YHWH is Lord of history, because he is the author of history. YHWH foreordains all that comes to pass, including the rise and fall of great empires, even the rise and fall of the Babylonian empire and its troubled king.

Making good on his word, Daniel tells Nebuchadnezzar, “*your dream and the visions of your head as you lay in bed are these.*” Daniel is able to recall the dream, and can even recount the circumstances behind the king's dream. Daniel will also explain how it is that he knows these things—YHWH has revealed these things to Daniel. In verses 29-30, Daniel tells Nebuchadnezzar, “*to you, O king, as you lay in bed came thoughts of what would be after this, and he who reveals mysteries made known to you what is to be. But as for me, this mystery has been revealed to me, not because of any wisdom that I have more than all the living, but in order that the interpretation may be made known to the king, and that you may know the thoughts of your mind.*” YHWH speaks to his people through various forms of revelation, including dreams and prophecy, unlike those who can only spin arrows, pray to idols, or poke through animal entrails to discover the will of the “gods” (cf. Ezekiel 21:21). But in this case, YHWH reveals the future to Nebuchadnezzar as a form of judgment.

Recall that in verses 10-11, the Chaldeans tried to explain their failure by telling the king, “*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.*” But Daniel knows the mysteries the Chaldeans cannot possibly know—there is a God in heaven, who is Lord over all things, including Nebuchadnezzar. Before the incarnation of Jesus—who is wisdom incarnate—Daniel knows, in part, what the Apostle Paul describes to the Corinthians (in 1 Corinthians 2:6–16, our New Testament lesson). There is divine wisdom, “*although it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to pass away. But we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glory. None of the rulers of this age understood this, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.*” These are things “*God has revealed to us through the Spirit. For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God.*” This is the kind of wisdom that the living God who dwells in heaven has given to his prophet Daniel.

For those like Nebuchadnezzar, who are not given such wisdom by God and who are left entirely to their own devices, Paul explains that, “*the natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.*” Because the “gods” of the Chaldeans are inanimate, mere natural forces, or even vague signs supposedly left behind in nature, the Babylonian “gods” are mute and silent. They cannot impart wisdom or understanding or spiritual discernment because they do not exist! The God who has given Daniel wisdom, reveals his favor and his purposes (the “things of God”) to his people through his prophets—Daniel now being one of them. Daniel knows the contents of what the king has dreamed, and Daniel even knows the circumstances under which Nebuchadnezzar dreamt them!

Beginning in verse 31, Daniel recounts the actual contents of Nebuchadnezzar's dream.

“You saw, O king, and behold, a great image. This image, mighty and of exceeding brightness, stood before you, and its appearance was frightening. The head of this image was of fine gold, its chest and arms of silver, its middle and thighs of bronze, its legs of iron, its feet partly of iron and partly of clay. As you looked, a stone was cut out by no human hand, and it struck the image

on its feet of iron and clay, and broke them in pieces. Then the iron, the clay, the bronze, the silver, and the gold, all together were broken in pieces, and became like the chaff of the summer threshing floors; and the wind carried them away, so that not a trace of them could be found. But the stone that struck the image became a great mountain and filled the whole earth. `This was the dream.’”

In this dream, the king saw a huge statue composed of four metals, of great brightness, completely terrifying to a man used to terrifying others. Daniel has already told the king that his God (YHWH) revealed both the dream to Nebuchadnezzar and the mystery of its meaning to Daniel. This was no ordinary late-night goat meat shish kebab dream. This was divine revelation. And not knowing YHWH, the mighty warrior Nebuchadnezzar is terrified by what he saw.

There is much debate about the sequence of metals mentioned—gold, silver, bronze, and iron, imagery surprisingly common in the ancient world.³ As depicted in the dream these metals refer to successive empires—although future to both Nebuchadnezzar and Daniel, we know them to be the great empires of the ancient near east, beginning with the Babylon empire (626-539 BC), followed by the Persian empire (550-330 BC), in turn followed by the Greeks under Alexander the Great (312-60 BC), and then finally by Rome. That the statue stands on iron feet mixed with clay which is then destroyed by a huge stone (which crushes the feet, causing the statute to topple), tells us that the destruction of the final empire depicted will occur during the iron portion of the successive empires (the Roman empire). That the stone was not made by human hands, points in the direction of YHWH’s act.

Furthermore, the scene of the wind carrying off the dust—all that remains of the statue—points in the direction of the totality of the destruction of the statue, as well as to the fact that that which is symbolized by the statue (the four great ancient world empires) is as dust to YHWH, who replaces those dominant empires represented by the statue, with a great and triumphant kingdom which grows from the stone which destroys the statue. The final empire—YHWH’s kingdom—grows to the size of a mountain, and replaces all the empires depicted by the statue. The mountain which fills the whole earth clearly anticipates the messianic mission of Jesus and the growth of his kingdom which spreads to the very ends of the earth. We’ll talk more about this kingdom next time.

Having recounted the content of the king’s dream, in the latter half of verse 36, Daniel explains “*now we will tell the king its interpretation.*” Before we move on to discuss Daniel’s interpretation of the king’s dream, we need to say something about Nebuchadnezzar’s reaction—which is initially is terror (after awakening from his dream), which then gives way to frustration and anger (because his magicians cannot tell him what he dreamt, nor can they interpret it), before finally falling on his face before Daniel as recounted in verses 46-49. The mighty king—not used to being challenged—must have been completely dumbfounded that this captive servant boy can reveal so much when the king’s professionals could not. YHWH often uses the foolish things of the world (the young Daniel) to confound the wise (the king).

Daniel’s God-given interpretation of Nebuchadnezzar’s dream begins in verse 37. “*You, O king, the king of kings, to whom the God of heaven has given the kingdom, the power, and the might, and the glory, and into whose hand he has given, wherever they dwell, the children of man, the beasts of the field, and the birds of the heavens, making you rule over them all—you are the head of gold.*” Initially, Nebuchadnezzar must have been flattered by the identification of his power and his mighty kingdom as

³ Steinmann, Daniel, 134.

the “head of gold”—the most expensive of the metals which compose the statue. Commentators have long debated the meaning of the phrase, “*you rule over them all*” implying that Nebuchadnezzar’s rule is in some way comprehensive. The Babylonian king ruled over a vast empire from the Nile (in Egypt) to Palestine (on the west), to the Black and Caspian Seas (on the north), to the Indus River to the east (in what is now Pakistan)—a huge territory. A fierce warrior, Nebuchadnezzar was greatly feared by all the leaders of the other kingdoms surrounding his.

But two times Daniel points out in his interpretation that Nebuchadnezzar’s power and might was “given him” by YHWH.⁴ Most commentators agree that this is the primary point from Daniel, but as others have pointed out, Nebuchadnezzar had, by this time, laid siege to Jerusalem, and had become its Suzerain (the king to whom Judah must submit, by paying tribute, joining in alliances under Babylonian direction, etc). There is a sense that for a Jew, to rule Jerusalem, was to rule the whole earth. That may be implied by Daniel here, especially if we recall the second verse of the prophecy (Daniel 1:2), that YHWH had given the king of Judah (Jehoiakim) over to Nebuchadnezzar.

Now comes the bad news—the reality. Nebuchadnezzar will not live forever as his enchanters have prayed. He and his empire will be defeated and replaced by a kingdom inferior to his own (the silver portion of the statue), followed by another of decreasing value (bronze), and yet another (iron/clay). In verses 39-40, Daniel tells the king, “*another kingdom inferior to you shall arise after you, and yet a third kingdom of bronze, which shall rule over all the earth. And there shall be a fourth kingdom, strong as iron, because iron breaks to pieces and shatters all things. And like iron that crushes, it shall break and crush all these.*” Although each of these kingdoms is inferior to the preceding kingdom, this cannot refer to the size and geo-political influence of these kingdoms, since each empire predicted by Daniel (the Persian, the Greek, and then Rome) were all larger and lasted longer than the Babylonian empire.

One way to understand the “inferiority” of the successive empires is that despite their increase in size and power from one to the next, YHWH will thwart all human ideas of progress, and humanity’s sinful and misplaced trust in the strength of kings and their power of empires. One commentator puts it this way: “While human beings operate on the idea that we get better and stronger with time, God’s vision undercuts our understanding, informing us that the opposite is true. Gold gives way to silver, which then becomes bronze, iron, and a weak mixture of iron and clay. A statue which starts out in grandeur and beauty ends in weakness.”⁵ Another has written, “its splendor dissipates (from gold to iron to clay, but its hardness increases (from gold to iron).”⁶ Another possible way to understand this progressive inferiority is that each of the successive kingdoms were plagued by increasing disunity, a point which will resurface in the visions of chapters 8-9.⁷ The Babylonian empire had only one golden head (Nebuchadnezzar), but the silver kingdom has the chest and two arms, the bronze a belly and two thighs, while the fourth has two legs and two feet—perhaps pointing to divided kingdoms plagued by internal strife and in-fighting.

⁴ Baldwin, Daniel, 103.

0. Longman, Daniel, 82.

⁶ Davis, The Message of Daniel 47.

⁷ E. J. Young, Daniel: The Geneva Series of Commentaries (Carlisle PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1978), 74.

These interpretations all imply that there is yet another subversive theme found here in Daniel 2. That which sinful men and women see as great and mighty—the great economic and military power projected by these empires and their leaders—is, from God’s perspective, the consequence of human pride and foolishness. The empires grow larger and greater in power to the eyes of those without divine wisdom and understanding. Yet from a heavenly perspective (which requires the wisdom God gives), these empires become more and more divided and internally weaker and weaker—perhaps we might say more corrupt and decadent? As they do so, the effects of sin are especially evident to God’s people despite the great power which these empires appear to manifest to the world.

As for the details of the dream, there are several interesting points to consider. Not much is said about it, but Daniel interprets the bronze kingdom as also ruling over all the earth—just as Nebuchadnezzar’s does. But it is crushed by the fourth kingdom about which Daniel has the most to say (beginning in verse 41). *“And as you saw the feet and toes, partly of potter’s clay and partly of iron, it shall be a divided kingdom, but some of the firmness of iron shall be in it, just as you saw iron mixed with the soft clay. And as the toes of the feet were partly iron and partly clay, so the kingdom shall be partly strong and partly brittle. As you saw the iron mixed with soft clay, so they will mix with one another in marriage, but they will not hold together, just as iron does not mix with clay.”* If this kingdom is the strongest of all because it can crush all others—iron being the strongest of the metals mentioned—it is also brittle because the iron is mixed with clay. There is a lack of internal cohesion which points to the eventual dissolution of the fourth empire. Critical scholars excepted—Christians have believed that this fourth empire is the Roman empire, during which time Jesus was born and carried out his messianic mission.⁸ Christ’s kingdom will eventually conquer Caesar’s.

This fits with the final element in Daniel’s interpretation of Nebuchadnezzaer’s dream in verses 44-45. *“And in the days of those kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that shall never be destroyed, nor shall the kingdom be left to another people. It shall break in pieces all these kingdoms and bring them to an end, and it shall stand forever, just as you saw that a stone was cut from a mountain by no human hand, and that it broke in pieces the iron, the bronze, the clay, the silver, and the gold. A great God has made known to the king what shall be after this. The dream is certain, and its interpretation sure.”* Despite the brilliance and terror generated by the vision of the statue, the fourth and final empire in this succession will be destroyed by a rock not made by human hands.

Since the four successive world empires are depicted as a statue made by human hands, but the rock is not, the rock has a divine origin. If the former is a sign of human success and ingenuity (and which eventually collapse), then the rock is a symbol of something much, much, greater. The rock cut from the mountain without human hands represents YHWH’s kingdom which one day—when the latter days have come (cf. v. 28)—will crush the empire of iron with the feet of clay. The critical point is that the God whom Daniel serves, who lives in heaven, will one day, establish his kingdom over all the earth.

This prophetic prediction would, of course, provide a wonderful word of encouragement to the people of Judah, soon to be taken in exile by the very king whose dream Daniel is now interpreting, and to whom Daniel is foretelling the eventual destruction of his kingdom.⁹ A point Nebuchadnezzar either does not grasp, or completely rejects when, seventeen years later in 587 BC, he sacks Jerusalem and destroys the

⁸ Steinmann, Daniel, 137.

⁹ Longman, Daniel, 82-83.

temple of YHWH. Yet Nebuchadnezzar will not live eternally—he will face YHWH on the day of judgment, and his kingdom will be crushed by YHWH, when gold (Babylon) gives way to silver (Persia).

What then do we take with us from this passage in terms of application? In the conflict between YHWH and the idols there is no question as to the outcome. Having no reality, the idols are nothing but the mirror image of human sinfulness and futility. YHWH is the Lord of all, his kingdom crushes all the kingdoms of this world. It is YHWH who raises up kings and empires, and it is YHWH who then crushes them to fulfill his sovereign if altogether mysterious purposes. Nothing which happens in this world catches YHWH by surprise or is outside his control.

Because YHWH is the God in heaven who reveals mysteries, we also see that the knowledge of spiritual things (the difference between Daniel and the Chaldeans) must be granted to God's people through YHWH's gift of wisdom—of whom Jesus Christ is the supreme revelation. As Paul tells the Colossians (2:2-3) may your hearts *“be encouraged, being knit together in love, to reach all the riches of full assurance of understanding and the knowledge of God's mystery, which is Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.”* To know Jesus (through trust in him and his word) is to possess the wisdom of God—something all the sorcerers, wise man, sages, philosophers, and scholars will never find apart from God's self-revelation in his word and in the person of his son (Jesus) and through his saving work (his death and resurrection), which usher in that kingdom which will never be destroyed.