

“Your God Is God of Gods and Lord of Kings”

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

Texts: Daniel 2:44–49; John 18:33–28

Nebuchadnezzar had a frightening dream—it was not a nightmare, but divine revelation. In this dream, the Babylonian king saw a statue of a mighty and brilliant figure which absolutely terrified him—and he was a man who prided himself on his ability to terrify others. Knowing this was no ordinary dream and that it foretold his own future as well as that of the empire he ruled, the king demanded that his court magicians recount the contents of the dream and then give the king an interpretation. When it became clear to Nebuchadnezzar that his magicians cannot recount the details of the dream, much less interpret it for him, the king grows furious and threatens his magicians with death—along with the entire palace staff, including Daniel and his three friends. The image which the king saw in his dream had a head made of gold, its chest and arms were made of silver, its belly and thighs were made of bronze, while its feet were an odd mixture of clay and iron. Suddenly, in the dream, a rock hit the statue’s feet, shattering them and causing the entire statue to crumble into pieces. The fractured remains eventually disintegrate into dust which was scattered by the wind so that nothing of the statue remained behind. The rock which smashed the feet of the statue had been cut from a mountain without human hands, and rapidly grew into a giant mountain which eventually filled the entire earth. What did all of this mean?

This dream terrified Nebuchadnezzar because it had been given to him by none other than YHWH (the true and living God), who, in turn, revealed both the dream and its contents to a young Hebrew servant in the Babylonian royal court, who also happened to be a prophet of YHWH. In the dramatic conflict between Daniel and the wise men and magicians (the Chaldeans) which plays out in the Babylonian royal court (in reality this is a conflict between YHWH and the idols of Babylon), Nebuchadnezzar learns the fate of his empire—it will be defeated and destroyed. At the same time, the people of God are given a panoramic vision of the four great empires which will arise and then fall until the coming of Israel’s Messiah (Jesus) who will crush the last of these great empires as his kingdom extends into all the earth and endures until the very end of time. It is Daniel’s God, not Nebuchadnezzar’s “gods,” who rules heaven and earth, and directs the affairs of people and nations. King Nebuchadnezzar is terrified for good reason—his “gods” and his magicians cannot help him. Nebuchadnezzar is at the mercy of YHWH.

We wrap-up the account of Nebuchadnezzaer’s dream (in Daniel 2), by considering the king’s unexpected response to the amazing ability of Daniel to do what the king’s expert magicians cannot do—recall and explain this bizarre and frightening dream. The 49 verses of the second chapter of the Book of Daniel can be divided into four parts. The first part (vv. 1-13), deals with Nebuchadnezzaer’s dream and the king’s challenge to the Chaldeans to recall and explain the meaning of the dream. In the second part of the chapter (vv. 14-23), Daniel recounts that YHWH revealed both the contents of the dream and its meaning to Daniel—which Nebuchadnezzar demanded from his court magicians but which they could not provide for the king. The third part of the chapter (vv. 24-45), which we covered last time, involves Daniel’s recounting and explanation of the meaning of the dream to the king. We will wrap up our time in Daniel 2 by considering the fourth part of the chapter (vv. 46-49), which describes Nebuchadnezzar’s response to Daniel, after his young Hebrew servant interprets the dream for the great king.

As we saw last time, the four metallic parts of the statue represent the four great world empires which successively conquered and/or occupied the land of promise (Israel) from the time of God's judgment upon his people when they were cast from the land and go into exile (for their gross idolatry and unbelief), until the coming of the Messiah (Jesus). After recounting the details of the dream, and then interpreting it for the king, Daniel tells Nebuchadnezzar that the golden head of the statue symbolizes the Babylonian king who has already laid siege to Jerusalem, taking Daniel and his three friends captive in 605 BC, but who has not yet sacked Jerusalem, destroyed the temple, or taken the bulk of the population of Judah into exile (as he will do in 587 B.C.). Gold is the most valuable of the metals composing the statue, so the king was initially flattered that he was depicted in such a favorable way.

But the golden head (Nebuchadnezzar and his empire) will be displaced by another empire symbolized by the silver chest and arms of the statue. This is the Persian empire, which defeated the remnants of Nebuchadnezzar's Chaldean/Babylonian empire and which then dominated the entire Middle East from 550-330 BC. Until the end of Daniel's life—as we will see in our passage—he remained in the Babylonian Court even after Babylon was conquered by Persia—Daniel staying on to serve Cyrus, the Persian emperor. Persia, in turn, will give way to the next great empire symbolized by the bronze belly and thighs. This is the Greek Empire (under Alexander the Great) which dominated the region from 312-60 BC. Daniel will say more about the Persian and Greek empires in the vision recounted in chapter 8.¹

The Greek empire will likewise be replaced by yet another great empire—the last in the series in the dream, the Roman empire—which, in Nebuchadnezzar's dream, was symbolized by the feet of the statue, made of iron mixed with clay. Iron is the strongest of the metals, yet the odd mixture of iron with clay in the dream points in the direction that this empire—although very strong as symbolized by the feet of iron—will suffer from internal weakness and division, and eventually will be crushed at the initiative of YHWH, who gave Nebuchadnezzar this dream, and the proper interpretation of it to Daniel.

Lest we forget, Daniel's God-given ability to recount the dream and give an interpretation saves the lives of Daniel and his three friends, as well as the lives of the entire palace staff whom Nebuchadnezzar had ordered to be killed. This ability to interpret dreams also cements Daniel's role in redemptive history as one of Israel's great prophets, as well as a man who will remain close to those pagan kings who will lead two of the great empires depicted in the dream, whose geo-political interests include YHWH's people, Israel (Judah). Daniel will have a front row seat for the fall of Babylon and the rise of Persia—but not in Jerusalem (with other exiles such as Ezra and Nehemiah, or the prophets Zechariah and Malachi). Rather, Daniel will see this play out from Babylon while serving as a prefect in the court—where the Babylonians and the Persians will determine the fate of Daniel's people (the Jews), under the sovereign direction of YHWH, the true and living God whom they acknowledge but refuse to worship.

Christians have almost universally believed that the concluding scene of the vision in Daniel 2 is a prophetic foretelling of the coming of Jesus and his kingdom some six hundred years off in the future. The rock made without human hands which crushes the last empire in Nebuchadnezzar's vision (the Roman empire) is symbolic of Christ's kingdom. After the dawn of Jesus' messianic mission, the Roman empire was eventually evangelized and fell to Barbarian invaders at some point in the 5th century AD. Yet, Daniel sees in the dream that Jesus Christ's kingdom will spread throughout the whole of the earth (the giant mountain seen by Daniel). If we fast forward 600 years ahead to our Lord's appearance before the Roman governor Pilate (as in our New Testament lesson from John 18), shortly before Pilate turned

¹ Hamilton, *With the Clouds of Heaven*, 95.

Jesus over to the Jews for crucifixion, we hear loud echos in Pilate's court from Daniel's vision of a kingdom which spreads throughout the entire world.

In response to Pilate's direct question, "*Are you the King of the Jews?*" Jesus answers the governor in words which resound with echoes from Daniel 2:44-45. "*My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from the world.*" Daniel's description of an eternal kingdom in verses 44-45 points us ahead to a coming king with an all-conquering kingdom quite unlike the geopolitical kingdoms depicted earlier in the dream. "*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.*"

As Jesus tells Pilate, his kingdom has nothing to do with military conquest—the sense that men like Nebuchadnezzar or Pilate would have understood conquest—because Jesus' kingdom is not of this world, or as Daniel puts it, it is like a stone made by no human hand, yet which shatters all the great kingdoms on earth at the end of the sequence of empires. Jesus' declaration that his kingdom is not of this world (echoing Daniel 2), sets the stage for what is soon to come in his messianic ministry—Jesus will be crucified so as to die for our sins. But Jesus will also be raised from the dead. Jesus' kingdom (the rock not made by human hands) conquers all the kingdoms of this world because this king (Jesus) conquers not by the sword, but by defeating our greatest enemies, death and the curse, in his own dying and resurrection from the dead. This, of course, is the very thing the pagans cannot understand.

The vision recounted in Daniel chapter 2 is utterly remarkable in that it takes us all the way from the days of Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonian empire (605 BC) up to the time of the coming of the Messiah (Jesus, about 30 AD), who, in turn, repeatedly speaks as though Daniel's prophecy were written about him, and that through dying and rising again his kingdom will spread to the ends of the earth. All of the great empires seen by Daniel are not only shattered by the spread of this kingdom, but become nothing but the dust of history, scattered by the winds. In chapter 7 of his prophecy, Daniel will be given a vision of four great beasts (a lion, a bear, a leopard, and a terrifying beast with iron teeth) which must be interpreted for him by an angel. In the vision of Daniel 7, the prophet sees four kings from these same four empires. In chapter 2, the scene culminates in the messianic age (and the coming of Jesus whose eternal kingdom is not of this world), while the vision in chapter 7 culminates in the revelation of an evil figure described as a "little horn" making great and blasphemous boasts—an antichrist figure.

These remarkable visions map out the future course of human history which such amazing accuracy, they not only serve to confirm the truth of Scripture (which is why critical scholars do everything in their power to assign a date to Daniel's prophecy after these things have happened), but they take us from the time of Daniel's days in the Babylonian royal court, all the way up to the time of the final consummation (the general resurrection and the judgment). As one writer puts it, "Daniel reaches back to grab the thread of the story by opening with the exile of Daniel and other sons of Israel to Shinar (Dan. 1); then carries it forward to 'the end of days'" (12:13).² The vision recorded in Daniel 2 gives us a big picture (box top) look at the course of human history—where it will go, and why.

² Hamilton, *With the Clouds of Heaven*, 41.

Yet, one of the most amazing elements of Daniel 2 is the closing scene in verses 46-49. Relieved that the meaning of this terrifying dream finally has been explained to him, and apparently flattered by the fact that he is the head of gold (but not realizing the full implications of what Daniel has told him), the king directs his attention to Daniel—this young Hebrew captive, of Jewish nobility, forcibly made a servant of the king of an opposing empire, yet who despite all the attempts at indoctrination in Babylonian religion, continues to worship the God of his fathers (YHWH). This young man who excels at all things assigned to him in the royal court, alone can both recall and interpret the king’s dream. According to verse 46, “*then King Nebuchadnezzar fell upon his face and paid homage to Daniel, and commanded that an offering and incense be offered up to him.*” Nebuchadnezzar, the great king of Babylon who bows before no man, does the unthinkable—he bows before and pays homage to Daniel, a mere servant.

This is important for several reasons, not the least of which is that Daniel’s life is spared (along with everyone else’s in the royal court). The language used here of “paying homage,” “making an offering” (probably of grain—cf. Ezra 7:1)³ and “burning incense”—is typical of pagan worship as described throughout the Old Testament.⁴ By honoring Daniel in this way, Nebuchadnezzar seeks to honor Daniel’s “God,” acknowledging that YHWH is great and mighty, yet not, apparently, grasping the full significance of the failure of his own wise men and magicians to gain insight from the Babylonian “gods” who are anything but “true” or “living” as is YHWH. Furthermore, the fact that the great king would pay homage to a young Hebrew servant is yet another sign of the subversive nature of Daniel’s witness to YHWH in the Babylonian royal court. Daniel might be a young man, a captive, a Jew, a mere servant to the king, but Daniel is YHWH’s representative (and a prophet), bearing witness to the true and living God while serving in the royal court of the very empire which will wreck havoc on his own people.

In paying homage to a mere servant, Nebuchadnezzar confirms Daniel’s assertion that the contents of the dream and the interpretation of it were given to Daniel by his “God.” We read in verse 47, that “*the king answered and said to Daniel, ‘Truly, your God is God of gods and Lord of kings, and a revealer of mysteries, for you have been able to reveal this mystery.’*” The king refers to YHWH using three titles, “God of gods,” “Lord of kings,” and “revealer of mysteries.” In identifying YHWH as “God of gods,” Nebuchadnezzar is not making a confession of faith in YHWH, but merely acknowledging that YHWH is more powerful than the “gods” invoked by his own court magicians.⁵

Since Daniel’s God appears more powerful than the “gods” of Babylon, then Daniel’s God is also “Lord of kings,” which may be a sort of begrudging acknowledgment from the pagan king that Daniel’s God is currently in control over human kingdoms, even to the point that the “great” Nebuchadnezzar has been forced to rely upon the interpretation of his dream given him by a mere Hebrew servant, Daniel. In saying this, the king is admitting that Daniel’s interpretation is indeed correct—YHWH alone can reveal such dreams, and only YHWH’s servants can interpret such dreams. It is also a tacit admission that Nebuchadnezzar’s magicians were wrong when they affirmed in verse 11, that “*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.*” As the true and living God who dwells in heaven, YHWH can and does speak to his people. YHWH is therefore the only “revealer of mysteries.”

³ Baldwin, Daniel, 103.

⁴ Steinmann, Daniel, 142.

⁵ Steinmann, Daniel, 142.

At first glance it may appear as though Nebuchadnezzar has had some sort of religious breakthrough—a conversion. But as we will see in the next chapter, Nebuchadnezzar remains a through-going pagan, committed to polytheism, ordering all of his officials to worship a golden statue. We also know that Nebuchadnezzar will destroy the city of Daniel’s God and YHWH’s temple in 587 BC—sure signs that Nebuchadnezzar’s acknowledgment of YHWH after Daniel interprets his dream is tied to his momentary relief that his dream has been explained to him, not to any real expression of faith or change of heart. That Nebuchadnezzar would one day seek to wipe Jerusalem and its temple off the map tells us much more about Nebuchadnezzar’s soul, state of mind, as well as his understanding of YHWH’s person and power than does his acknowledgment of YHWH’s greatness to Daniel as recounted in Daniel 2.

Once again, the parallels between the Book of Daniel and Joseph Story (Genesis 37-50) come to the fore in Daniel’s account. Both of these men had been taken captive in an oppressive and foreign land (Joseph in Egypt, Daniel in Babylon). Both men interpret the dreams of foreign monarchs who oppress the people of God (Pharaoh and Nebuchadnezzar). These are dreams which no one else can interpret (because these dreams are divine revelation). Both Joseph and Daniel are then promoted to high positions in civil government by the respective kings. In the case of Daniel, however, he *and* his friends are promoted and all are placed in positions of great authority. At the end of the chapter we learn that *“the king gave Daniel high honors and many great gifts, and made him ruler over the whole province of Babylon and chief prefect over all the wise men of Babylon.”* Ironically, the pagan wise men now answer to a Hebrew prefect who worships YHWH. But mindful of his friends, *“Daniel made a request of the king, and he appointed Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego over the affairs of the province of Babylon. But Daniel remained at the king’s court.”* This is a rather remarkable turn of events—given the way the Book of Daniel opens, when the young Daniel (a mere boy) is captured and taken from his home.

It is worth noting—before we wrap up and then draw a few points of application—the prophet Jeremiah, who was first active beginning in the days of king Josiah of Judah (640-609 BC), lived to describe the fall of Jerusalem to Nebuchadnezzar in 587 BC and devotes a significant portion of his prophecy (chapters 21-29) to the destruction of Jerusalem (God’s judgment will fall upon the false prophets and wicked kings of Israel). Jeremiah also foretold of Judah’s eventual restoration (chapters 30-33). In light of the remarkable rise of Daniel and his three friends, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, to positions of prominence in Babylon’s civil government, I think it important to consider Jeremiah’s letter to his fellow Jews already exiled to Babylon (a group which includes people like Daniel and his friends). The letter is found in Jeremiah 29. A portion of it (vv. 1-9) reads as follows:

These are the words of the letter that Jeremiah the prophet sent from Jerusalem to the surviving elders of the exiles, and to the priests, the prophets, and all the people, whom Nebuchadnezzar had taken into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon. This was after King Jeconiah and the queen mother, the eunuchs, the officials of Judah and Jerusalem, the craftsmen, and the metal workers had departed from Jerusalem. The letter was sent by the hand of Elasah the son of Shaphan and Gemariah the son of Hilkiyah, whom Zedekiah king of Judah sent to Babylon to Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon. It said: “Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare. For thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: Do not let your prophets and your diviners who are among you deceive you, and do not listen to the dreams that they dream, for it is a lie that they are prophesying to

you in my name; I did not send them, declares the LORD.

The key take-away from Jeremiah's letter is YHWH's explicit instructions that those Jews exiled in Babylon ought to get on with their lives, even though they have been exiled from the land of promise (Israel). God's people in exile are to build houses, plant gardens, get married and have large numbers of children. They are to seek the welfare of the city (Babylon) where they now live and they are to pray for God's blessing upon their new homeland (even if their stay there is temporary). But while living in exile, they must not worship pagan "gods" since they remain the people of YHWH. They should do all of this knowing that YHWH will return them to the land of promise in his appointed time, which is why they should not listen to false prophets in their midst who "predict" this return will happen any moment. This is exactly what Daniel and his three friends did over the course of their lives, along with the other exiles about whom we read in our series on Ezra-Nehemiah (who unlike Daniel) did return to Judah. Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, sought the welfare of the city (Babylon—the capitol of the empire which inflicted such a humiliating defeat upon Israel) by serving in its government as YHWH commands.

If we endeavor to understand the closing verses of Daniel 2 in light of Jeremiah's instructions to the exiles, the application for us begins to come into view. The people of God are still the people of God even as exiles. This exile theology (a theology of pilgrims) is, as we saw in our series on 1 Peter, the normative experience of the people of God in the new covenant era until Jesus returns at the end of the age. We are to do all the things Jeremiah instructed the exiled Israelites to do while in Babylon. We live our lives, we seek to flourish where we are, we serve the city in which we dwell, but we do so as disciples of Jesus Christ. We too live among the pagans in the civil kingdom, but we cannot worship their gods nor live as they live. Like Daniel, we too serve as subversive witnesses to those around us that the kingdom of Jesus Christ will conquer all the kingdoms of this world through the proclamation of the good news that Jesus died for sinners and that he conquered death and the grave in his resurrection.

As pilgrims on our way to the heavenly city, the pagans around us may indeed acknowledge Jesus Christ as an important historical figure and religious teacher, just as Nebuchadnezzar begrudgingly acknowledged YHWH in the presence of Daniel, "*your God is God of gods and Lord of kings.*" Yet, we know what Daniel could not, and what our neighbors cannot understand apart from the eyes of faith. Jesus alone is King of kings and Lord of lords, because he fulfilled all righteousness by obeying God's law perfectly. Jesus died for our sins (accepting the unjust verdict of death by crucifixion from Pilate at the behest of the Jews). Jesus rose again from the dead the first Easter in a glorious victory over our greatest enemies, death and the grave. When Jesus ascended to the right hand of the Father (what he meant when he told Pilate that his kingdom was not of this world) we see in much greater clarity what Daniel saw when YHWH revealed to him the meaning of Nebuchadnezzaer's dream. Jesus Christ's kingdom "*shall break in pieces all these kingdoms and bring them to an end, and it shall stand forever.*"

Since Jesus defeated death and the grave, then the power of sin over us has been broken, and we have the sure and certain proof that all of Jesus' promises are "yes" and "amen." We also see how a kingdom made without human hands and not of this world, will nevertheless endure forever by crushing all the kingdoms of this world—not through the power of the sword, but through the preaching of the gospel.