

DANIEL 2 CBC 18.10.2020

Last week we saw in chapter one how Daniel and his friends were taken as prisoners to Babylon, where Nebuchadnezzar was trying to convert them. They resolved to lay down a marker for their loyalty to God by not touching the King's food. That decision shapes the rest of their story (in fact, chapter two is linked to chapter one in the Hebrew text by the little word "And").

Chapter 2 tells of a dream which Nebuchadnezzar has and Daniel explains. And there's a change of language: 2:4 – 7:28 is in Aramaic, the common language of the empire, because these stories are calling people everywhere to worship Israel's God.

Read Daniel 2:1-49 ...

Where is hope to be found in an age of bad, egocentric leadership? This chapter tells us.

It begins with Nebuchadnezzar, the most powerful man on earth, unable to sleep peacefully. He's had a bad dream. Despite his power as a King, at heart he's a child afraid of the dark. His impression is that he's dreamt something that threatens his kingdom. What's this rock that smashes everything? He's been reminded that there are some things he can't control.

Why should Nebuchadnezzar take so much notice of a dream? We assume dreams are simply a reflection of our inner world. But in Nebuchadnezzar's day they were seen as a gateway to the outer world – a means of contact with the gods, especially for kings and rulers. Dreams in Babylon were a big deal and a small army was paid to interpret them. So Nebuchadnezzar did what we all do when we want to understand life: he sent for Piers Morgan, Oprah Winfrey, etc.

But like thoughtful people in every generation, Nebuchadnezzar wondered if these gurus really knew what they were talking about. They say, "*Sure we'll interpret your dream. What was it?*" And Nebuchadnezzar replied, "*You tell me! Prove you know your stuff!*" He didn't want them making things up. He'd gone past the point for religious games. He was getting serious. He wanted real answers to real questions.

His advisors couldn't cope. "*That's a job for the gods!*" they protested – but alas, the gods of Babylon were strangely silent (vv.10-11). "*But that's what I pay you for – to connect with the gods! And now you're admitting that you cannot access the gods??*" It raises a very important question: Is one god as good as another? Or is it possible there's only ONE God who speaks – and that to choose another is to choose a dud, and to build a life on sand?

God exposes how futile all man-made religion is. It takes us down a cul-de-sac because it comes from within this world and can't take us beyond. Unless we have a word from outside, we're stymied. By and large, people in our culture are stuck in that wasteland: they have no word from outside to tell them where life is heading and how they should live today. And that's why there's so much insecurity and angst. So long as we think of life on the horizontal plane alone, we can never know what life's about or what the future holds for us.

No wonder people get ratty! Nebuchadnezzar became more infuriated and irrational. *If my empire falls, I'm finished. You tell me what's happening or I'll kill you.* If he'd had access to Twitter he'd have been tweeting in block capitals.

But it did no good. His advisors couldn't answer his questions, so he sentenced them to death. His dream became a nightmare for everyone. It turns out that Babylon is a place of helplessness, fear and brutality. We're given a glimpse of Babylon behind the glitz and glamour.

Meanwhile, in a distant corner of the palace, a newly-graduated junior clerk called Daniel is at his desk when he learns that he's wanted at the execution ground because the king has gone doolally. But Daniel knows that God has wisdom and knowledge beyond any king. And he knows that when we're desperate, God is still God.

And it led to the first youth prayer meeting we read of in history. It's magnificent! There are just four of them and they're threatened by a superpower – and they dared to believe it was worth talking to God about it. And we know far more about God than they did – why don't we pray like that? They said, "We don't deserve this knowledge, but let's go to God and beg for mercy." And God in His kindness revealed what they needed to know to be saved.

And when Daniel had worshipped and praised God, note what he did next (v.24): "*Don't kill the wise men*". His attitude to his pagan colleagues is exemplary. Instead of gloating over their probable execution, he rescues them. God cares about these confused magicians.

And God cares for this confused king too. So Daniel goes in to this terrifying man and says, "*There is a real God – and He's been speaking to you in your dreams – and He's sent me to confirm the message and help you to understand it.*" God can speak through dreams – it's not a lazy alternative for searching the Scriptures, just a reminder that God can break through into anyone's life in any way He wants. Many Muslims are having dreams that start them on the road to Christ – it happened to Nebuchadnezzar. God disturbed him in order to teach him; and He taught him in order to help him – to show him there's only one God so that he could respond appropriately.

Nebuchadnezzar's dream

Daniel relates Nebuchadnezzar's dream with pin-point accuracy (vv.31-35): a colossal statue with a *head of gold, chest and arms of silver, belly and thighs of bronze, legs of iron*. Its strength is impressive – until we look at the feet, which are made of a feeble mixture of iron and clay. The whole great edifice is unstable, because it has nothing solid to stand on.

Yet its final collapse is brought about not so much by the weakness of its feet as by the strength of another force altogether: a rock not cut out by any human hands, which shatters the statue and reduces it to dust which is blown away by the wind. Meanwhile, the rock itself grows into a huge mountain that fills the whole earth.

And then Daniel gives the interpretation, but pause for a moment and see how he addresses Nebuchadnezzar (vv.37-38): "*The king of kings*"! Can that be right? In ch.1, Daniel refused to identify with Babylon – has he now been won over? No. Daniel knows we have to speak the language of Babylon in order to communicate within the system.

Jesus had words for this: Give to Caesar what's in his image, and give to God what is in HIS image (Mark 12:17). You are in the image of God – don't give yourself to Caesar. But do give to Caesar what he's entitled to. Acknowledge the place of the leader. That's how to serve in society. Speak the language – but don't eat the Turkish delight.

That's what Daniel does. He speaks the language of Babylon but the message is still the message of the Kingdom of God. Daniel isn't a "Yes" man. He's saying "No" in the politest way he can (vv.37-38): "*You are the head of gold! You are all these wonderful things! BUT – only because God gave them to you. And it's not going to last.*"

Because after you (v.39) there'll be more kingdoms, represented by the silver, bronze, iron. Precisely *which* kingdoms has been debated among both Jews and Christians. Only the head of gold is definitely identified (v.38 = Nebuchadnezzar / Babylon), so perhaps precise identification ("this = that") isn't the point. God doesn't unveil everything.

But He tells us enough. The dream reveals that world history is a series of kingdoms. And none of them last. The whole edifice of human power rests on an unstable foundation. The statue has feet of clay. All dreams of man-made utopia will end in disillusionment.

But we shouldn't get hung up on the matter of precise identification, because whichever those kingdoms are, *they're not the focus of the vision*. The spotlight falls on *a rock not cut out with human hands* which falls on the feet and breaks them, and eventually sweeps away the other kingdoms and fills the whole earth (though we're not told how long this takes).

What is this rock? In the light of the New Testament, surely the rock is none other than our Lord Jesus Christ. He's the stone that crushes the kingdoms of this world because He's the One into whose hands the Father has committed all judgement (John 5:22). But He's also the foundation stone on which God's Kingdom stands: "*See, I lay in Zion a cornerstone, chosen and precious*" (1Peter 2:6). He's the foundation on which life has to be built. Earth's kingdoms? Dust that blows away. But Christ is a colossal stone, a sure foundation, ultimate stability. That's why He's qualified to reign.

When does the stone fall? v.44 "*in the days of these kings*" – but the time frame is not given in detail. It was in the time of Rome that Jesus appeared – but this world's kingdoms have still not ended. But once again, the vision is not concerned with enabling us to "name the date". It's as vague in its details as it is certain in its outcome. And that's deliberate, because it's meant to encourage and challenge *every* generation of God's people (*see how John applies Daniel's visions to his day in the book of Revelation*). No matter when we live or which earthly kingdom is dominant, they'll all pass away. But God is building another kind of Kingdom that's rock-solid and will one day fill the earth. And those who belong to it build on a firm foundation. (v.44 "*will never be destroyed*").

This is the Christ we preach today to the petty tyrants with feet of clay who in their arrogance ignore God and strut about the place as if they were masters of all. The message of the statue destroyed by the rock is a warning to proud kingdoms in every age. In the words of Jesus: *The Kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe the gospel*.

The Aftermath? Nebuchadnezzar is overwhelmed and falls on his knees and confesses Daniel's God to be God of gods and Lord of kings (vv.46-47). So Nebuchadnezzar is not the boss after all! And Daniel and his friends are promoted to the top jobs. And they all lived happily ever after? Not quite. The end is never the end until it's THE End. But that's ch.3.

The lesson of ch.2 is that we worship and serve a sovereign God. God rules, not the Nebuchadnezzars of this world. Of course, not every tyrant gets on his knees and gives glory to God. Nor do God's faithful servants always get promotion. Sometimes they get execution instead. But God rules at all times. Somehow God ensures that even man's wickedness moves heaven's purposes steadily forward and brings about what God has planned.

And that's a marvellous thought. It means that if you belong to Jesus, you can know that even if everything else is blown away – your job, your health, your family, your country – you'll still be safe in His unshakeable Kingdom.

That's where our hope lies in an age of bad, egocentric leadership. And here's where Christians can stand out. In a day when people's heads are drooping, we can lift our heads and look up because our redemption is drawing near!

Let me leave you with v.45: *"The dream is true!"* Human beings need a dream. But not a mirage. This dream says to us, "Don't be impressed with human power, whether it glitters like gold or is as hard as iron – it's all so fleeting." Human rulers and empires come and go and enter the landfill of history. Only Jesus' Kingdom will outlast time, because God has given to Jesus a Name above every other name, to which every knee will bow. How terrible it would be to miss out because we invested our hopes in kingdoms which were doomed to pass away. But how marvellous to be a part of such a Kingdom as Jesus gives. *On Christ the solid rock I stand; all other ground is sinking sand."*

PRAYER:

*So be it, Lord; Thy throne shall never,
like earth's proud empires, pass away;
Thy kingdom stands, and grows for ever,
till all Thy creatures own Thy sway!*

Father, help us by Your Spirit, at all times and in all places, to live for the everlasting kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ; in whose Name we pray. Amen.

FOR REFLECTION, DISCUSSION AND ACTION:

- What does this chapter do to your cherished desire to build your own kingdom?
- How is the future God has revealed shaping your action in the present?
- Next time you feel threatened, what do you need to know about God to react as Daniel did?